

# Reassessing the Sarcophagi of Ravenna

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The city of Ravenna is rich in surviving funerary monuments from the fifth century, when it served as the capital of the western Roman Empire and the Gothic kingdom of Italy, and the latter half of the sixth and seventh centuries, when it was the base of operations for Byzantine rule of Italy. For present-day visitors to Ravenna, the sarcophagi created during the late Roman and early Byzantine administration of the city are ubiquitous reminders of the Roman heritage of the city and of the important political role it played in Byzantine Italy. Besides their value as art historical objects providing a template for demonstrating the evolution of Roman styles in the medieval world, these sepulchral monuments are the most visible physical evidence of continuity in physical form from imperial Rome to the end of Byzantine influence in the eighth century. Their survival in great numbers and continued adaptation in Ravenna were exceptional and illuminate the changing social and cultural dynamics of the city.

This study has two main objectives: to reassess the historical value of sarcophagi outside of their art historical role and to tie together these physical objects with the growth and development of episcopal burial in Ravenna. The point of departure is the sarcophagi used and created in Ravenna from the Ostrogothic kingdom (493–540)—where, as evidenced by the *Variae* of Cassiodorus, both the materials and the craftsmanship for the creation of these monuments were highly valued—and continues to the reign of Charlemagne, who was hosted in Ravenna by Archbishop Gratosus,

whose sarcophagus is still extant.<sup>1</sup> Although the form of the sarcophagus remained consistent, a key transition is the change in the function of the tomb, especially as a monument connected to local episcopal power. By examining the early medieval sarcophagi as a group, the nature of these monuments and the functions they took on during the Byzantine exarchate provide a window onto the transformation of their use from vessels holding the deceased into monuments of episcopal authority, both spiritual and political.<sup>2</sup>

1 Cassiodorus, *Variae* 3.19, is a letter penned by Cassiodorus for Theoderic to a stonemason named Daniel, who was offered a monopoly on carving sarcophagi for the servants of the palace, but was warned not to charge too high a price. The history of Ravenna through this period has been recently reevaluated in D. M. Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2010).

2 Because of their relatively complete state of preservation and large number, these sarcophagi have frequently been the object of study, although consistent with the interpretation of sarcophagi as artworks rather than as objects of social and political significance. This is perhaps most clearly visible in G. Koch and H. Sichtermann's authoritative handbook, *Römische Sarkophage* (Munich, 1982), which introduces sarcophagi as "römische Kunstwerke." The main modern catalog of sarcophagi of Ravennate origin is *Die ravennatischen Sarkophage* (Berlin, 1979), by J. Kollwitz and H. Herdejürgen and published as part of the series *Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs*. Kollwitz was also responsible for an earlier effort, *Die Sarkophage Ravennas* (Freiburg, 1956), which has been superseded by this later edition.

Another study of note is M. Lawrence's *Sarcophagi of Ravenna* (New York, 1945), in which only Christian sarcophagi from after the fourth century with complete or nearly complete relief decoration are examined. Although describing only forty examples, compared

One example of the use of a sarcophagus and its public role in the eighth century is that of Gratosus, a man of humble origins who was elevated to the position of archbishop of Ravenna, having previously held the position of abbot in a local monastery. In his brief tenure as leader of the church of Ravenna (786–789), his main accomplishment, as recorded by Agnellus of Ravenna, was hosting Charlemagne during his first trip to Italy.

At his death, Gratosus was interred in a sarcophagus in the Church of Sant'Apollinare in Classe. The case was a simple trough decorated with three crosses, between which a simple inscription was carved. It was covered with a semicylindrical lid, also decorated with crosses, and with a “guilloche pattern . . . approaching the rope-pattern” around the perimeter (fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> The use of a sarcophagus did not reflect any innovation whatsoever on the part of those responsible for the burial of Gratosus's body, as his

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to the ninety-eight featured in Kollwitz and Herdejürgen, it sufficiently articulates the issues surrounding these later sarcophagi as well as the complex and varying stylistic categories that make Ravenna's corpus of sarcophagi unique among those of late antique Mediterranean cities. A third catalog focused on Ravenna is G. Valenti Zucchini and M. Bucci's *I sarcophagi a figure e a carattere simbolico* (Rome, 1968), volume 2 of the *Corpus della scultura paleocristiana bizantina ed altomedioevale di Ravenna*, edited by G. Bovini. In many ways, it has been superseded by the more comprehensive work by Kollwitz and Herdejürgen, but remains valuable in its presentation of the medieval material absent from the latter's corpus and for its focus on the inscriptions on these funerary monuments. Bovini was also responsible for an earlier attempt at a catalog and chronology of the Christian sarcophagi of Ravenna, *Sarcophagi paleocristiani di Ravenna* (Vatican City, 1954).

Older catalogs, including H. Dütschke, *Ravennatische Studien: Beiträge zur Geschichte der späten Antike* (Leipzig, 1909), and K. Goldmann, *Die ravennatischen Sarkophage* (Strassburg, 1906), have done much of the groundwork in the study of these sarcophagi, but otherwise have long been obsolete. A number of other catalogs contain descriptions and analysis of the sarcophagi of Ravenna as part of a much larger body of examples and thus provide an easy platform for comparison, as in J. Dresken-Weiland, G. Bovini, and H. Brandenburg, *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*, vol. 2, *Italien mit einem Nachtrag Rom und Ostia, Dalmatien, Museen der Welt*, ed. Thilo Ulbert (Mainz, 1998), and G. Koch, *Frühchristliche Sarkophage* (Munich, 2000), which places the corpus from Ravenna alongside those of Rome and Constantinople, while F. W. Deichmann's significant three-volume *Ravenna: Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes* (Wiesbaden, 1958–89) contains discussions of some sarcophagi as part of a larger analysis of the extant monuments of the late antique city.

3 Lawrence, *Sarcophagi of Ravenna*, 41.

immediate predecessors had all been entombed the same way in Sant'Apollinare and in various churches throughout the city with similar simple epitaphs on their sarcophagi. These tombs, monuments to the bishop's role in the city and in the local episcopal hierarchy, would have been visible to all who entered the church and their inscriptions available as guides for commemoration; many must have been visible in the early Middle Ages, and examples of these inscriptions and their locations appear in Agnellus, who notes in reference to the tomb of John VI (c. 778–785), Gratosus's predecessor, “you will find his epitaph written over his tomb.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the normality of this event for Gratosus (as well as his predecessors and his biographer), outside of Ravenna the continued use of sarcophagi in any significant quantity in a single location had disappeared by the eighth century, leaving these marble tombs in Ravenna as unique monuments of Christian funerary culture as well as remarkable tools for understanding the process by which authority was promoted within the evolving political climate of this early medieval city.

The continuous and uninterrupted use of a single type of funerary monument—or large-scale material expenditure produced from the second through the ninth century—is extraordinary in Mediterranean society. While very few other objects connected with social practices remain essentially unchanged from the height of the Roman Empire to the reign of Charlemagne, the key to the survival of the sarcophagi both in material and in function is that through appropriation into Christian practice, their meaning and cultural relevance were maintained. In examining this phenomenon closely, this paper examines why these “antique” forms were reclaimed materially for later use, how sarcophagi formed part of a system dedicated to reaffirming the positions of new elites and new networks in Ravenna, and how this utilization fit into a much larger scheme in which the composition of the local elite underwent a realignment during the transition to the post-Roman world with the local church obtaining the dominant political position.<sup>5</sup>

4 “Epitaphium inuenies super eum continentem ita”: Agnellus, *Liber pontificalis Ravennatis Ecclesiae* (hereafter *LPR*), 153.

5 On the reuse of Roman and early Christian sarcophagi in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in Italy, see B. Andreae and S. Settis, eds., *Colloquio sul reimpiego dei sarcophagi Romani nel Medioevo: Marburger Winckelmann-Programm 1983* (Marburg, 1984). On the specific reuse of sarcophagi from Ravenna, see

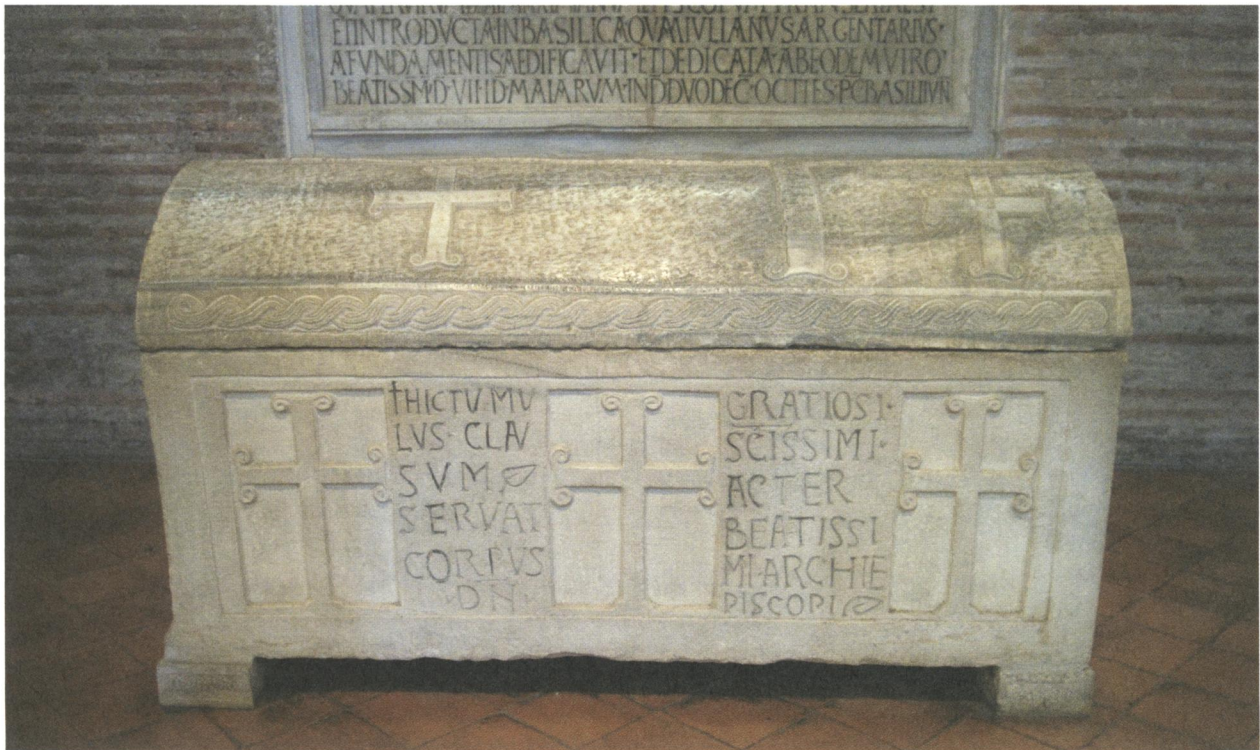


FIG. 1 Sarcophagus of Gratosus, Sant'Apollinare in Classe (all photographs, unless otherwise specified, are by E. Schoolman)

The survival of the use of such sarcophagi depended ultimately on the continued efficacy of the monuments, the transformation of the conditions under which they were used, and the way in which new audiences perceived them.

### Sarcophagi and Funerary Practice

The modern study of sarcophagi has been closely tied to that of funerary practice, a cultural element that has received a great deal of scholarly attention from medievalists and historians of the Roman world with respect to numerous elements, including self-identification, artistic production, and social traditions. In general, these studies can be divided into

those that take a primarily archaeological approach to funerary studies and those that examine their cultural and social implications. Ravenna has proved to be an unusually rich area for the study of funerary practice and commemoration, and many facets of these traditions have become topics unto themselves, from Roman stelae of second-century mariners to the Christian sarcophagi, and from the large-scale medieval burials outside of Classe to the monumental tomb of Theoderic.<sup>6</sup> Few, however, have looked at these memorials over the span of the city's existence while examining the cultural and political systems to which they belong.

In the Roman world, sarcophagi were more than simply places to entomb the dead. They were one of the many types of memorials designed to "perpetuate the memory of the dead,"<sup>7</sup> and being made of expensive

S. Settis, eds., *Colloquio sul reimpiego dei sarcophagi Romani nel Medioevo: Marburger Winckelmann-Programm 1983* (Marburg, 1984). On the specific reuse of sarcophagi from Ravenna, see D. Verkerk, "Life after Death: The Afterlife of Sarcophagi in Medieval Rome and Ravenna," in *Roma Felix: Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome*, ed. É. Ó. Carragáin and C. Neuman De Vegvar (Aldershot, 2007), 83–96.

6 On the complexities of urban burial in Ravenna, see E. Cirelli, *Ravenna: Archeologia di una città* (Borgo S. Lorenzo, 2008), 114–29.

7 M. Carroll, *Spirits of the Dead: Roman Funerary Commemoration in Western Europe* (Oxford, 2006), 279.

material and created with fine workmanship for display, they would both “gratify the departed and . . . impress the living beholders.”<sup>8</sup> They were only one way in which the deceased could be memorialized, but the options for the preservation and burial of the dead were shrinking in the Christian era. Owing to their preserving a body intact while also allowing space for commemoration, the sarcophagus crossed easily from pagan into Christian use.<sup>9</sup> It was still a choice, however, for a family or a community to use sarcophagi, limited only by cost and social taste.

The sarcophagi in the city of Ravenna are especially remarkable for their continuity, comparable perhaps only to those from Rome and Constantinople. They began as alternatives to traditional Roman burial practices, perhaps as a way for the dead to be interred in columbaria or other tombs with funerary niches without having to undergo cremation. They became popular because they were excellent conveyances for inscriptions, an element that would become more important by the first century BC as “monumental tombs and funerary inscriptions gradually became a prime form of status display, social competition, and perpetuation of memory.”<sup>10</sup> They are the final stage in an evolution of funerary type, from wall relief, stele altar, and urn, with “one type slowly replacing another according to changes in social practice and funerary custom.” Sarcophagi too underwent an evolution in form, in use, and in the locations in which they could be left: set outdoors on pedestals; placed in funerary structures (such as mausoleums and columbaria), in catacombs, and around martyria; and buried in cemeteries and eventually in churches.<sup>11</sup>

8 J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (London, 1971), 270.

9 Although most scholarship has divided the corpus of sarcophagi into “pagan” and “Christian” based on their motifs, this break is purely artificial, and evidence suggests that workshops were simultaneously creating tombs that included both sets of iconographies: J. Elsner, introduction to *Life, Death and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, ed. idem and K. Huskinson (Berlin, 2010), 1–20, at 8–9.

10 Carroll, *Spirits of the Dead*, 16.

11 M. Koortbojian, “In commemorationem mortuorum: Text and Image along the ‘Streets of Tombs,’” in *Art and Text in Roman Culture*, ed. J. Elsner (Cambridge, 1996), 211. The variety of situations in which sarcophagi are utilized, especially in the early Christian period, has been outlined in J. Dresken-Weiland,

Although sarcophagi held the body and were also vehicles for commemoration and reminders of the social roles of the persons who were entombed, they functioned as well as a larger and more elaborate medium for artistic exploration compared with the typical and smaller funerary urn or stele. In this case, because sarcophagi preserved the body intact, a necessity in Christian practice, and served as a large-scale means of display, they easily made the transition from Roman and pagan to Christian use early on, first by their users adapting “motifs with pagan associations such as the vintage harvest, bucolic scenes, or the hunt” for Christian purposes and later with the addition of figural scenes from the Bible within traditional architectural framing.<sup>12</sup> This early adaptation was critical to their continued popularity, and based on the elaborately carved monuments that reflected new artistic themes, “the fourth century [became] a golden age of Christian sculpture in the form of sarcophagi.”<sup>13</sup>

For Ravenna, however, the continuity of the form extends far beyond the fourth century, a fact indicative of the unique political situation of the city. The active and regular use of sarcophagi continued into the early ninth century, with numerous stylistic innovations and with significant reuse and modification of early pagan and early Christian tombs throughout later centuries.<sup>14</sup> This longevity of production and use is remarkable for a single city, as the use of sarcophagi declined greatly in the rest of Italy after the fourth century. Their continued creation or reuse survived primarily in the

*Sarkophagbestattungen des 4.–6. Jahrhunderts in Westen des römischen Reiches* (Rome, 2003).

12 Carroll, *Spirits of the Dead*, 271. For Christian and Roman applications of burial of a body, see A. C. Rush, *Death and Burial in Christian Antiquity* (Washington, DC, 1941), 236–53. On the theological necessity for preservation of the body, see Y. Duval, *Auprès des saints, corps et âme: L’inhumation “ad sanctos” dans la chrétienté d’Orient et d’Occident du III<sup>e</sup> au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1988), 17–21.

13 J. Elsner, “Late Antique Art: The Problem of the Concept and the Cumulative Aesthetic,” in *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire*, ed. S. Swain and M. Edwards (Oxford, 2004), 281. The impact of the Christianization of sarcophagi in terms of decoration, figural representation, and meaning has come under closer scrutiny, notably in the contributions to Elsner and Huskinson, *Life, Death and Representation*.

14 The reuse of sarcophagi in these contexts certainly qualifies as spolia in the modern sense on a number of levels: in their material nature, in the reuse of the images they portray, and in the reappropriation of their original function as burial monuments.



shadow of the Roman Empire, especially in Gaul and in Constantinople, in noticeable quantity, although under rather different circumstances.

The use and reuse of sarcophagi for burial from the pagan and into the Christian period in southern Gaul is well known and well studied.<sup>15</sup> The development there parallels that of Ravenna, with many of the ancient examples reused (although slowly diminishing in number) through the sixth century, followed by a period when new locally produced sarcophagi in a variety of regional styles become prevalent, beginning in the seventh century. The chapel of La Gayole, a sixth-century private chapel filled with repurposed sarcophagi, is an exceptional example of the variety of styles in use in late antiquity and their conscious redeployment.<sup>16</sup> The chapel includes a range of reworked sarcophagi, from that of Ennodius, which featured a reworked relief with a metrical inscription “that boldly commemorated the transition [of Ennodius] from the height of secular power to the otherworldly glory of Christian solitude,” to that of Syagria, on which a short epitaph was inscribed along the border.<sup>17</sup>

The real interest in Gaul, however, is the re-emergence of sarcophagi as a common burial form in the seventh century, often seen as correlating with the

increasing importance of Christianity in Frankish society. Unfortunately, these Merovingian sarcophagi frequently lack enough contextual material for dating, and while some had been painted, very few have surviving dedicatory inscriptions, a key difference between sarcophagi from early medieval Gaul and those from Ravenna. Although interment in sarcophagi continued to be an important part of the larger funerary culture in Gaul, and some specific locations (like La Gayole or the early Christian necropolis at Martres-Tolosane) have large numbers of tombs, the institutionalization of the use of sarcophagi in Gaul differs from Ravenna with respect to the public nature of burials and their distinct ecclesiastical function.<sup>18</sup>

The establishment of the Carolingian dynasty created a new institutional use for sarcophagi. Although Charlemagne was famously interred in a late antique sarcophagus taken from Rome featuring the rape of Proserpina, he was not the first member of his family to choose (or be interred in) this type of monument. In 771 his brother Carloman was buried in Rheims in an antique sarcophagus that once belonged to a consul and featured scenes of a lion hunt. Charlemagne’s burial was overseen by his daughters, and, given his interest in imperial iconography, he may have consciously followed eastern imperial protocol in his choice of a sarcophagus. Louis the Pious, “in the footsteps of Charlemagne,” also selected a sarcophagus for himself, but rather than one with classical themes, he chose a distinctly Christian one, with images of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt while the armies of the pharaoh were swept by the returning Red Sea.<sup>19</sup> The establishment of Carolingian royal sarcophagi in the ninth century was not limited solely to emperors, as the surviving lid of a sarcophagus now in San’Ambrogio in Milan attests, since it records

15 The relative importance of the sarcophagi from southern France is represented by the fact that the first volume of *Antiquité tardive*, published in 1993, was dedicated to “les sarcophages d’Aquitaine.” See in particular the overview by E. James, “The Historical and Archaeological Context of the South-West Gallic Sarcophagi,” 23–28, which revisits the themes of his *Merovingian Archaeology of South-West Gaul* (Oxford, 1977). Southeast Gaul has its own corpus of work, outlined in M. Colardelle, *Sépulture et traditions funéraires du V<sup>e</sup> au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C. dans les campagnes des Alpes françaises du nord* (Grenoble, 1983).

16 For the chapel at La Gayole, see G. Démians D’Archimbaud et al., “La Celle,” in *Les premiers monuments chrétiens de la France*, vol. 1, *Sud-Est et Corse*, ed. N. Duval (Paris, 1995), 167–74; F. Baratte, “Les sarcophages de La Gayole et l’influence Attique en Gaule,” *Akten des Symposiums 125 Jahre Sarkophag-Corpus*, ed. G. Koch (Mainz, 1988), 249–61; G. Koch, “Zu dem verschollenen Attischen Sarkophag und La Gayole,” in *Imago Antiquitatis: Religion et iconographie du monde romain; Mélanges offerts à Robert Turcan*, ed. N. Blanc and A. Buisson (Paris, 1999), 291–96.

17 B. Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park, PA, 2002), 104. The epitaph of Syagria was published in E. Le Blant, *Les sarcophages chrétiens de la Gaule*, Collection de documents inédits sur l’histoire de France, 3rd ser. (Paris, 1886), 157.

18 J. Boube, “La nécropole paléo-chrétienne de Martres-Tolosane,” *Pallas* 3 (1955): 89–115, and idem, “Les Sarcophages paléochrétiens de Martres-Tolosane,” *CahArch* 9 (1957): 33–72.

19 The use of sarcophagi by Charlemagne, and other members of his dynasty, has been well addressed in J. Nelson, “Carolingian Royal Funerals,” in *Rituals of Power: From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. F. Theus and J. T. Nelson (Leiden, 2000), 131–84, esp. 150–52. This sarcophagus was destroyed during the French Revolution. As for the differences between the sarcophagi of Charlemagne and Louis, the latter’s “choice, strikingly different from that of his father, recalled his efforts to lead to the promised land the people entrusted to him by God”: I. H. Garipzanov, *The Symbolic Language of Authority in the Carolingian World* (Leiden, 2008), 305.

a simple epitaph for Bernard, the illegitimate grandson of Charlemagne and the king of Italy from 811 to 818.<sup>20</sup> While the use of sarcophagi in Carolingian burial was intermittent, imperial examples in the east demonstrate significant continuity.

The use of sarcophagi had a more robust legacy in Constantinople, where there is evidence for the continuing use (and reuse) of them, especially as imperial tombs, until the twelfth century and sporadically in other contexts in the empire.<sup>21</sup> Beginning with the Constantinian dynasty, sarcophagi became important elements in the burial of deceased emperors and members of the imperial family. In Constantinople, most emperors had been interred in sarcophagi of Egyptian porphyry until the sixth century, and then, until the reign of Constantine VIII, placed in the Church of the Holy Apostles. The locations of the deceased and the distinctiveness of their tombs meant that there was no need to designate or commemorate them with inscriptions, so the extant examples are identifiable only in connection with contemporary and near-contemporary descriptions.<sup>22</sup> During the

middle Byzantine period, different churches and monasteries were dedicated to imperial burial, and with the abandonment of porphyry during the reign of Justinian, many varieties of sarcophagi were employed, including previously occupied imperial sarcophagi. For example, after the remains of Michael III were translated to Constantinople by Leo VI, they were placed in a “sarcophagus of green Thessalian marble which had formerly held Justin I and Euphemia in the monastery of the Augusta.”<sup>23</sup>

In addition to interment in sarcophagi playing a role in imperial tradition, the written evidence suggests that the patriarchs of Constantinople were buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles. In a letter from 450 to Pope Leo, the empress Pulcheria comments that Flavian had been buried in the basilica of the Apostles, as had preceding bishops.<sup>24</sup> In this arrangement, however, it seems that patriarchs had a subservient role within the Church of the Holy Apostles, a situation further complicated by the fact that institutionally the commemoration of the patriarchs may have been difficult, given the large number who were politically deposed or anathematized as heretics.<sup>25</sup> The specific use of sarcophagi for the burial of patriarchs of Constantinople points to a possible parallel with Ravenna, where some bishops were buried in that city’s Church of the Apostles, although their burials became

20 A description of Bernard’s short epitaph can be found in N. Gray, “The Paleography of Latin Inscriptions in the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Centuries in Italy,” *BSR* 16 (1948): 90 (no. 60).

21 The study of the burials at the Monastery of Lips, V. Marinis, “Tombs and Burials in the Monastery *tau Libos* in Constantinople,” *DOP* 63 (2009): 161, suggests that the sarcophagi buried in the north church connected to the monastery were assigned either to the family members of Constantine Lips or to “distinguished members of the monastic community.” Elite burial in the narthex of churches is common elsewhere in the Byzantine Empire, for example, in Amorium: C. S. Lightfoot et al., “The Amorium Project: Excavation and Research in 2002,” *DOP* 59 (2005): 243–52. The tradition of sarcophagi continued in the Byzantine Empire intermittently, but after the eighth century there is a big resurgence in Greece as testified by the comprehensive catalogs and studies found in T. Pazaras, *Αναγλυφες σαρκοφάγοι και επιταφίες πλακες της μεσες και υστερης βυζαντινες περιόδου στην Ελλάδα* (Athens, 1988), and E. A. Ivison, “Mortuary Practices in Byzantium (c. 950–1453): An Archaeological Contribution” (Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, 1993).

22 In A. A. Vasiliev, “Imperial Porphyry Sarcophagi in Constantinople,” *DOP* 4 (1948): 25, the evidence from the Byzantine and Russian lists and descriptions of the tombs of the Constantinian dynasty and the surviving imperial sarcophagi are evaluated, up through the emperor Marcian in 457, when the practice of using porphyry ended, although access to the material did not. A fuller discussion of the exceptional survival of the use of sarcophagi in imperial burials is presented in P. Grierson, “The Tombs and Obits of the Byzantine Emperors (337–1042),” *DOP* 16 (1962): 1–63. On

the Church of the Holy Apostles in particular, see G. Downey, “The Tombs of the Byzantine Emperors at the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople,” *JHS* 79 (1959): 27–51.

23 Grierson, “Tombs and Obits,” 27. Grierson refers to a number of other imperial translations, including three sarcophagi containing the remains of Maurice and his children that were brought to the newly converted monastery (and former palace) Myrelaion as a means to create a new imperial funerary location for Romanos Lekapenos and his family.

24 Pope Leo, *Ep.* 77 (PL 54:905–8).

25 I would like to thank Deborah Deliyannis for sharing this insight with me based on her research on the public commemoration of bishops in Ravenna and Constantinople. In his *ekphrasis* on the church of the Holy Apostles, Nikolaos Mesarites describes the elaborate commemorative monument to John Chrysostom and the sarcophagus of Gregory of Nazianzos (an oblong rectangular sarcophagus of ruddy color *ἐν τετραγώνῳ ἑτερομήκει περιγραφόμενος λάρνακι πυρρακιζούση*). Both were reinterred during the reign of Constantine VII: G. Downey, “Nikolaos Mesarites: Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople,” *TAPS*, n.s. 47 (1957): 915.

more common in various parts of the city as their importance grew.<sup>26</sup>

What ultimately sets Ravenna's sarcophagi apart from those of southern Gaul and Constantinople is the institutional patronage of these funerary monuments and later their function. Unlike royal and imperial tombs in the Carolingian realm or Constantinople, these monuments in Ravenna became closely intertwined with elite and episcopal institutions, a tradition most visible in the *Liber pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* of Agnellus.

### Agnellus and the Early Medieval Value of Sarcophagi

A primary reason one is able to discuss the function of sarcophagi in Byzantine and early medieval Ravenna, in addition to the images they display and the inscriptions they carry, is the immense fascination Agnellus of Ravenna had with epigraphy and with the death and burial of bishops. Agnellus was a cleric in the church at Ravenna and the author of a serial biography for the bishops and archbishops of Ravenna modeled on the *Liber pontificalis* of the pope. There had been forty-seven bishops of Ravenna before Agnellus began his account, and he details the burials of thirty-eight of them. Agnellus provides a clear sense of the pattern of episcopal burial from chapels in local (perhaps favored) churches both inside and outside the city to centralized

burials in Sant'Apollinare in Classe, a shift common in the sixth century.<sup>27</sup>

Compared to the other episcopal lists from Italy, namely the *Gesta episcoporum neapolitanorum* and the *Chronica patriarcharum gradensium*, and even the model, the papal bibliographies from the *Liber pontificalis*, Agnellus's goes far beyond simple descriptions, as he supplies not only locations but also descriptions of the tombs and the accompanying epitaphs when available.<sup>28</sup> He goes to great lengths at times to record what he perceives to be the correct inscription and even notes when he cannot accurately read it.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond the main purpose of describing the lives of the bishops and archbishops of Ravenna, Agnellus presents four stories not attached to any particular bishop's reign that demonstrate not only his fascination with the dead, but also the ninth-century understanding of the importance of early sarcophagi. Two of the stories he relates not only took place in his presence but also involved him and are indicative of the great lengths to which he would go to access the remains of bishops.

The first tale separate from the historical narrative of the bishops appears within the first section of the *Liber pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis*. In his discussion of St. Apollinaris, whom he considers to be the founder of the church in Ravenna, Agnellus begins with a listing of the miracles the saint performed, including that he "revived the dead daughter of the patrician

26 The parallels between Ravenna and Constantinople were intentional and began in the fifth century, encompassing the secular and the sacred. The best evidence for the use of Constantinople as model of an imperial city is found in the toponyms for locations mentioned in the *Liber pontificalis* of Agnellus, including an *ad Laurenta* (corresponding to the Constantinopolitan palace of Daphne), *ad Calchi* (in the form of the Church of San Salvatore ad Calchi), *ad Blachernas* (site of Agnellus's monasterium in Classe), and churches like that of the Holy Apostles. By the time Agnellus was writing, however, allusions to Constantinopolitan palaces in the place names of Ravenna may not have been fully understood: J. M. Pizarro, *Writing Ravenna: The Liber Pontificalis of Andreas Agnellus* (Ann Arbor, 1995), 12–15; R. Faroli Campanati, "Ravenna, Constantinopoli: Aspetti topografico-monumentali e iconografici," *Storia di Ravenna*, vol. 2, pt. 2, *Dall'età bizantina all'età ottoniana*, ed. A. Susini (Venice, 1992), 127–57. On the position of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Ravenna as an episcopal funerary center and the tombs located there, see I. Baldini Lippolis, "Sepolture privilegiate nell'Apostoleion di Ravenna," *FR* 153–56 (2000): 15–79, at 21–25.

27 This shift toward a central area, often a basilica, for burial is quite common in northern Italy. Ravenna, which has its central burial basilica outside the city, seems to have been an outlier: J.-C. Picard, *Le souvenir des évêques: Sépultures, listes épiscopales et culte des évêques en Italie du Nord des origines au X<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Rome, 1988), 390–91. Picard, who has written much on this topic, especially the burials in Ravenna, argues that this shift from scattered episcopal burials to central ones, as well as the development of the value of burial *ad sanctos*, marks the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages.

28 In his descriptions, Agnellus uses *sepulchrum* to discuss tombs in general and seems to differentiate and use the expression *saxa archa* to designate stone sarcophagi. With respect to inscriptions, Agnellus is certainly not the only early medieval writer interested in epigraphy. For a short overview, see M. A. Handley, *Death, Society and Culture: Inscriptions and Epitaphs in Gaul and Spain, AD 300–750* (Oxford, 2003), 175–78.

29 The fact that he correctly records the epitaph on a marble slab belonging to the bishop Agnellus, as mentioned above, supports the argument that many of the epitaphs and inscriptions recorded by Agnellus in his *Liber pontificalis* were extant in his lifetime.

Rufus.” Breaking from the narrative and discussing events contemporary to his own life, Agnellus reports that Theodore, the bishop of Bologna, had: “carried off the stone sarcophagus in which the patrician Rufus was placed with his daughter, and took it away to his church at Bologna, so that, after his death, he might be buried there. But what did it benefit him, that he cast out others from it? He was not buried in it, for he acted too slowly to set it up.”<sup>30</sup> Although Agnellus derides the actions of Theodore who died too quickly to complete his spoliation of the Ravennate sarcophagus, he supplies two important pieces of information about how ancient sarcophagi were used in the ninth century.

One reason for the reuse of sarcophagi by ecclesiastical elites, especially those thought to originate in the earlier Christian community, was that it brought them physically closer to the saints and those touched by them. Theodore sought to possess the sarcophagus of Rufus and his daughter to put himself in contact physically with individuals who had been healed by a saint and the first bishop. This does not equate to burial *ad sanctos*, but was desirable through the assumed historical connection to Apollinaris. In addition, as the sarcophagus may have been decorated with “early Christian” design and featured either symbolic or figural representations (as most episcopal sarcophagi did), these visual elements would have increased its desirability in the ninth century.

Another benefit in the reuse of a sarcophagus seems to have been that it could be quickly set up after the death of an individual. Although the bishop Theodore was not actually interred in the sarcophagus of Rufus, as Agnellus notes, because he did not set it up quickly enough before his imminent death, it would have taken much less time to prepare an existing sarcophagus, already featuring Christian imagery, than to commission construction specifically for the newly deceased.

An unintended benefit of burial in a sarcophagus is that the entire tomb, body and sepulcher, could be moved together if necessary. Agnellus reports this occurring with Peter III (570–578) in an account that is

30 LPR 1: “. . . saxeam archam, ubi Rufus patricius sua cum filia positus fuit, abstulit et ad suam ecclesiam Bononiensem deportavit, ut, postquam defunctus, ibidem sepultus fuisset. Sed quid ei profuit, quod alios exinde expulit? Et ille non in illa positus est, nam segnis ipse fuit eam stabilire.” Trans. D. M. Deliyannis, *Agnellus of Ravenna: The Book of Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna* (Washington, DC, 2004), 101.

somewhat inconsistent. He states that Peter was buried in the narthex of the Church of St. Probus in Classe, but then writes that his body was “placed in a large stone sarcophagus, next to the Church of St. Euphemia, which is called ‘by-the-sea’ . . . which is now destroyed. After that, the very sarcophagus was pulled out and placed in another location.”<sup>31</sup> Whether Peter III was originally placed in St. Euphemia, or whether his placement in the sarcophagus represents a translation from St. Probus, Agnellus seems to put a great deal of importance on his “large stone sarcophagus,” as this was the object removed from St. Euphemia and relocated, with the body presumably still inside.

The next two examples demonstrate Agnellus’s fascination with the deceased bishops and the lengths to which he went to gain access to their remains. In the first example, Agnellus goes so far as to open a sarcophagus to confirm the identity of the bishop held within it. It begins with Agnellus ensconced in his monastery, working on his history and uncertain about the tomb of Peter I (ca. 431–450).<sup>32</sup> He is visited by George, a priest at the Church of San Severo in Classe, who after hearing of Agnellus’s conundrum offers to show him the tomb. Racing on horseback to Classe, they enter the chapel of St. James in the baptistry of San Severo, where Agnellus records the following:

We saw the tomb made from precious Proconnesian stone, and we lifted up the lid a little with difficulty. We found inside of this sarcophagus a box made of cypress; and when we had raised its cover, both of us saw the holy body, positioned just as if it had been buried, being tall in stature and the skin showing paleness, all the limbs were intact, the chest and the stomach whole, and nothing was

31 LPR 97: “In arca magna saxea ibidem positus fuit, iuxta ecclesiam beatae Euphemiae quae uocatur Ad mare . . . quae nunc demolita est. Exinde ipsa arca euulsa est et in alio loco posita est.”

32 There are serious difficulties surrounding Agnellus’s description of the bishops named Peter. There is some confusion as he mixes up details about all three, even assigning the identity of the much-venerated sermonist Peter Chrysologus to the second of the Peters rather than the first. With respect to the description of the tomb, Deliyannis suggests that because the word *archiepiscopus* is used in the inscription, the tomb he describes presumably belongs to Peter III, as the term began to be used in the sixth century: Deliyannis, *Agnellus of Ravenna*, 124 n. 10.

missing except that the little pillow for the head was diminished.<sup>33</sup>

Agnellus goes on to describe the body of the bishop as heavy with a sweet smell of incense (and myrrh and balsam), just as one might find at the tomb of the saint. Although it is clear that what Agnellus describes is a saintly body, said to be *beatus* and *sanctus*, it nevertheless belongs to a bishop whose sanctity is derived through his office as part of his overall authority within the community.<sup>34</sup> His final remark about this tomb is that above it the image of this bishop was depicted along with the text *Domnus Petrus archiepiscopus*. The inclusion of this remark reiterates Agnellus's fascination with epigraphs and also places this tomb in the corpus of episcopal sarcophagi featuring simple epitaphs.

The final example features the excavation, pseudo-translation, and reburial of Archbishop Maximian (546–557) under the direction of Agnellus. Maximian was originally interred in a sarcophagus buried or perhaps placed in the crypt next to the altar of the Church of Sant'Andrea. After convincing Archbishop Petronax that the “body of blessed Maximian should be brought from under the earth and placed in an exalted place,” Agnellus was put in charge of overseeing the workmen as they raised the sepulcher out of the floor.<sup>35</sup>

They found the sarcophagus full of water, and after it was emptied, Agnellus counted the 115 bones of Maximian in front of everyone, perhaps as a way to prevent their theft before the remains could be reinterred; for added measure, he secured the linen bag containing the bones of the archbishop with his seal. After the sarcophagus was cleaned and presumably

positioned on the floor of the church, Agnellus treated the bones of Maximian like the relics of a saint, washing them with wine and embalming them with spices, and then ritualistically reburied them. Agnellus says that after the reburial, he felt as if “holy Maximian was standing before our eyes,” a description of a visualization of a cult of relics, where “the relics *were* the saint.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, bringing the sarcophagus out of the ground and making it accessible to others is very much in line with the traditional cult of saints, where “the tomb of the saint was declared public property as the tomb of no other Christian was: it was made accessible to all and became the focus of forms of ritual common to the whole community.”<sup>37</sup>

These depictions of burial and reburial offer a sense of how, ultimately, sarcophagi were used and viewed in the Christian periods of Ravenna. Agnellus illustrates some of the ways in which their reuse went beyond simply being an already constructed monument, as they were believed to provide connections to the earlier Christian communities. Furthermore, despite Agnellus's fascination with burials in general, he clearly understood that the previous bishops of Ravenna occupied many roles, from leaders in life to intercessors in death, within the church and within the broader political world, from exarchs to emperors.

### The History of Sarcophagi in Ravenna

There are more than a hundred sarcophagi and fragments known to have been made in Ravenna from the second through the ninth century. Thirty of them feature inscribed dedications to the deceased, with a small number from the Roman period designed to house the remains of two or more individuals, often husband and wife. Most of the inscriptions are in Latin, and two, the lid of the sarcophagus of the exarch Isaac and one fragmentary slab from the first half of the third century, are in Greek. The sarcophagus set up for Mindia Procilla by her husband, from the middle of the third century, features a bilingual inscription, and

33 LPR 26: “Vidimus sepulchrum ex lapide proconnisso precioso, et eleuauimus duriter atque modice coperculum. Inuenimus infra ipsam archam capsam cypressinam; cumque subleuassemus eius tegumen, uidimus nos ambo sanctum corpus, iacens quasi ipsa hora sepultus fuisset, longam habens cutemque pallore proditam, ex omni integra membra, pectus et uentrem integrum, nulla deerant nisi puluillus capitis minuerat.”

34 The use of both *sanctus* and *beatus* as titles for bishops was common even as early as the fifth century in official imperial correspondence, as well as other secular writings, and throughout late antiquity they were used for the titles of address for those in episcopal office: E. Jerg, *Vir venerabilis* (Vienna, 1970).

35 LPR 83: “corpus beati Maximiani de sub terra traheret et in sublimum poneret locum.”

36 LPR 83: “beatus Maximianus conspectui nostro staret”; P. J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1978), 39.

37 P. Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), 9.



another, from the middle of the third century, features Greek, Latin, and Greek transliterated into Latin.<sup>38</sup>

In Ravenna, the first period of sarcophagus production in Ravenna—typically referred to as “pagan” in the literature, although the actual religious proclivities of the owners are unknown—extends from the second to the end of the third century. The inscribed sarcophagi of Ravenna and Classe reflect the military and political characteristics of the area, but also the “Roman-ness” of the monuments, from those designed for children to those for the freedmen who could afford to join the *Augustales* and military veterans. From the evidence of the excavations, especially from Marabina, near Classe, the sarcophagi were used in what would be considered a typical manner, positioned on a road outside the city in areas dedicated as cemeteries as well as in roadside mausoleums. These funerary monuments, their locations, and their designs and inscriptions provide only a glimpse of the fully populated city. Along with other elements, ranging from a fragment of a personified *tyche* to the city walls, the city and its twin, Classe, appear to have been in line with the traditions of the Roman *civitas*.<sup>39</sup> The decoration of these sarcophagi follow general trends found throughout the Roman west and is typologically associated with the sarcophagi for other areas of Italy, including in early patterns of reuse.<sup>40</sup>

38 The Greek text belongs to an ossuary, A31, and its inscription can be found in M. Bollini, *Le iscrizioni greche di Ravenna* (Faenza, 1975), 33–34. The sarcophagus belonging to Isaac is B3, and the inscription is Bollini, 45–47. The second bilingual sarcophagus, A55, has its transcription reproduced in *CIL* 11:1, no. 81. The final sarcophagus (linguistically confused) is A35 (text is Bollini, 27–32), and it features as its opening CYRIA CHERE IULIANA, a transliteration of κυρία χαίρει Ἰουλιανή, which has been determined to be a greeting for a small child, with κυρία equating to *domina*: J. Robert and L. Robert, *REG* 66 (1953): 208.

39 P. Giacomini, “Anagraphe dei cittadini ravennati,” in *Storia di Ravenna*, vol. 1, *L'ero antico*, ed. G. Susini (Ravenna, 1990), 137–222. For the altar, see G. Bermond Montanari, “L'impianto urbano e i monumenti,” in Susini, *Storia di Ravenna*, 1:248–49. Although both Classe and Ravenna existed independently as cities, Classe superseded its neighbor in importance in the period before Ravenna's elevation to capital. See M. Bollini, “La fondazione de Classe e la comunità classiarica,” in Susini, *Storia di Ravenna*, 1:279–320, and A. Augenti, “Ravenna e Classe: Il racconto di due città,” in *Ravenna tra Oriente e Occidente: Storia e archeologia*, ed. idem and C. Bertelli (Ravenna, 2006), 29–56.

40 Koch and Sichtermann, *Römische Sarkophage*, 286–88; Dresken-Weiland et al., *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*, 2:83–100 (both n. 2 above).

There is a rich variety and large number of funerary monuments from the third century, but only one sarcophagus can be assigned with certainty to the fourth century, suggesting a clean break in the extant examples between pagan and Christian uses.

There is little certainty about why the fourth century represents a period lacking in sarcophagi in Ravenna. It is clear that other areas of Italy as well as Dalmatia, across the Adriatic, produced or acquired these types of funerary monuments in large quantities, albeit spread over many locations. One reason may be associated with political instability, as Classe, once home to one of the two major Roman imperial naval bases, lost its position with the dissolution of the Augustan navy in the mid-fourth century, while Ravenna had not yet been selected as the new political center for the administration of Italy.<sup>41</sup>

With the fifth century and into the sixth century, coinciding with the establishment of Ravenna as a political center for the western half of the empire, new styles of sarcophagi, well established elsewhere, appeared. These variants, lumped together as “Christian” through their overt use of religious imagery and symbol, had a different emphasis from those following strictly Roman conventions. They do not feature the deceased, but rather declare his or her piety and religious values through the display of Christian images or biblical scenes. As opposed to the earlier forms, a high degree of anonymity was provided for the dedicator and the dedicatee, because many Christian types, especially those featuring figures or scenes in relief without a central portrait, tended not have designated or clear areas in which to leave epitaphs and inscriptions. This practice was circumvented by placing inscriptions along the rim of the sarcophagus or on the lid when the identity of the deceased became important politically or liturgically. Both of these areas are used for inscriptions in the elaborately detailed fourth-century tomb of Junius Bassus, considered the apex of figural Christian sarcophagi, featuring a rich

41 “This campaign of 324 [between Constantine and Licinius] clearly marks the disappearance of the Augustan navy as an effective force, for neither of the hastily-levied squadrons shows any traces of the old fleets. The Italian squadrons officially lasted through the fourth century, for they appear in the *Notitia Dignitatum*; but they lost their title *praetoria* when the capital was removed from Rome”: C. Starr, *The Roman Imperial Navy, 21 BC–314 AD* (Cambridge, 1960), 198.

iconographic program of Old Testament and New Testament scenes in a double register as well as scattered traditional classical elements.<sup>42</sup>

In the fifth century, along with the creation of new types of Christian sarcophagi, including styles unique to Ravenna, tombs with traditional pagan motifs were reworked for new Christian clientele. Funerary monuments with images of cupids or scenes of nature were easily converted either without additional modifications or with the inclusion of crosses, Christological symbols, or new inscriptions. An example now found in the Church of S. Francesco in Carpi, 125 kilometers from Ravenna, features two cupids under an arch of architectural decoration on either side of a tabula set within columns and a pediment, a common form in northern Italy called a *tabernacolo*. In its earlier use the sarcophagus featured an inscription, which had been recarved with a rough relief of another architectural arch surrounding a Greek cross.<sup>43</sup>

In Ravenna, there are twelve examples of sarcophagi that were either modified during the fifth to the eighth century or were constructed during that time and feature inscriptions that provide details of the social position of the interred. Of these, two belong to individuals who held high positions within the local bureaucracies (royal and Ostrogothic, and imperial and Byzantine), one belongs to a husband and wife of indeterminate position, and the rest belong to bishops.

42 While there is rich German scholarship on this monument, there are recent studies in English, including E. S. Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* (Princeton, 1990), and the comprehensive examination by A. T. Christ, "The Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus: Patron, Workshop and Program" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1992). For the metrical inscription on the lid that seems to suggest that Junius was the recipient of a state funeral, see Al. Cameron, "The Funeral of Junius Bassus," *ZPapEpig* 138 (2002): 288–92.

43 F. Rebecchi, "I sarcofagi romani dell'arco adriatico," *AntAa* 13 (1978): 249–50, fig. 27. Rebecchi dates the new carving to the eighth century, but it still represents a good model of how pagan sarcophagi could be reworked into a valid and acceptable funerary monument with only the addition of Christian symbols and images. An alternative example from Ravenna would be the sarcophagus of Cyrilla Arrenia (A36). Although only the front panel is extant, it dates originally from the third century and was dedicated to a freedwoman, Cyrilla, by her husband. The inscription is original, but the panels on either side of the tabula were reworked in the eighth or ninth century, and a cross was carved on the left panel.

In terms of use and reuse and social position, interesting patterns have emerged. For bishops, sarcophagi in the fifth century seem to be both new constructions as well as reused models created in the second and third century. By the sixth and seventh centuries, one finds only reuse, and in the eighth century, sarcophagi are again being made, specifically for the burial of bishops. Only two sarcophagi for the secular elite survive. These belong to the cubicularius (eunuch chamberlain) Seda and the exarch Isaac, two high-level bureaucrats, and were clearly readapted for this later use. In general, from the sixth to the eighth century, both pagan sarcophagi and "Christian" sarcophagi were adapted for reuse, being valued not for their original displays but for their form and the ease with which they could be put to use during this period.

### Early Episcopal Sarcophagi of Questionable Authenticity and Classic Reuse

In dealing with this multifaceted corpus, the easiest approach is to examine sarcophagi chronologically with respect to the individuals cited in their inscriptions.<sup>44</sup> One methodological issue of note is the "forgery" of sarcophagi in the medieval period and the premodern classicizing readaptations of others. One flagrant example of the latter (among many from Ravenna) is the sarcophagus of Archbishop Ferdinandus Romualdus Guicciolus (d. 1761), who was interred in a fifth-century or mid-sixth-century sarcophagus in the cathedral in Ravenna. The epitaph on the eighteenth-century lid notes that the bishop was interred "in this ancient sarcophagus" (IN HOC ANTIQVO SARCOPHAGO), denoting his knowledge of the provenance of his tomb.<sup>45</sup>

Other examples are much less straightforward. Two of the earliest surviving bishops' sarcophagi may be early modern forgeries, a point that has been thoroughly debated in the study of sarcophagi as objects of art. There is no consensus about the dating, or even the legitimacy, of a magnificent figured sarcophagus

44 For some preliminary notes on episcopal burial in Ravenna, see R. Faroli Campananti, "Le tombe dei vescovi di Ravenna dal tardo-antico all'alto medioevo," in *L'inhumation privilégiée du IV<sup>e</sup> au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle en occident*, ed. Y. Duval and J.-C. Picard (Paris, 1986), 165–71.

45 In Verkerk's description of this reuse, she places the value of these early modern reuses not in supplying sanctity but in projecting "status and learning": Verkerk, "Life after Death" (n. 5 above), 92–94.

that features on its base plate the inscription HIC IACET CORPVS: D: LIBERII ARCHIEP, which could refer to any one of the three bishops named Liberius described by Agnellus, although most likely it is either Liberius II or Liberius III, both of whom held the episcopacy in the second half of the fourth century. (There are no exact dates for these earliest bishops.)<sup>46</sup>

Even if one cannot count with certainty the tomb of Liberius as an example of an episcopal sarcophagus from the fourth century, that one had been attributed to him consistently for an extended period in the early Middle Ages supports the supposition that the entombment of bishops within their churches in sarcophagi had a role beyond liturgy and piety, making in effect a political statement as much as a religious one. Agnellus reports that Liberius III was buried in the private chapel of San Pulio, which had been constructed during his tenure as bishop and was known during the time of Agnellus.<sup>47</sup> If the sarcophagus described above is the same sarcophagus believed to have held the body in the ninth century, its position in a smaller local church rather than a primary church in Ravenna would have both accentuated the episcopal authority within this private church as well as spread this authority to other areas of the city.

The fifth-century sarcophagus commonly attributed to Exuperantius (473–477), like the one

belonging to Liberius, features both a medieval and a modern inscription as evidence of its earlier ownership (fig. 2). The modern inscription notes that the sarcophagus also held the archbishop Maximian and that the monument was moved from the Church of Sant' Agnese, where it had been an altar. It currently is the altar of the crucifix in the cathedral in Ravenna.<sup>48</sup> The original location of Sant' Agnese noted in the modern inscription is supported by Agnellus's account: "and his tomb is in the previously mentioned basilica of Sant' Agnese [St. Agnes the martyr], before the altar under a stone of porphyry or, as some claim, behind the altar, beneath a stone of porphyry."<sup>49</sup>

The medieval evidence for this tomb consists of the back of an antique gravestone that had been used as a cover for the sarcophagus while it was an altar in the Church of Sant' Agnese. (In the eighteenth century, it was moved to the Museo Archievescovile in Ravenna.) The back of the gravestone features the following inscription: "Here rests in peace the body of the blessed Exuperantius, pontiff and confessor and archbishop of the blessed church of Ravenna."<sup>50</sup> This epitaph was not original, based on the appearance of the term *archiepiscopus*, but most likely a ninth-century addition.

The sarcophagus of the bishop Ecclesius (522–532) survives in a number of fragments, and like that of Exuperantius, there is some uncertainty about its date (fig. 3). One panel fragment features a scene of two palms, two peacocks, and two stags flanking a cross, while another has a raised relief of a cross inscribed

46 Of the scholars who have commented on this sarcophagus, Lawrence, *Sarcophagi of Ravenna* (n. 2 above), 13–17, attributes ownership from the modern base, and although the monument itself is not given a firm date, it is comparable to the "pagan Asiatic sarcophagi of the second and third centuries." In Valenti Zucchini and Bucci, *I sarcophagi* (n. 2 above), 27–28, the attribution is taken at face value, and is dated to circa 380. In Kollwitz and Herdejürgen, *Ravennatischen Sarkophage* (n. 2 above), 58–60, supported by evidence from the episcopal archive, a tentative date of the seventeenth century is suggested, although it follows a decorative and iconographic program similar to early fifth-century examples. The tomb currently functions as an altar in the Church of San Francesco in Ravenna, a further transformation and repurposing of the object in a church that houses a number of other sarcophagi collected in the early modern period. In its earliest iterations in late antiquity, it was dedicated to the apostles and was the burial location for three bishops: Florentius (the predecessor of Liberius III (late fourth century), Neon (ca. 450–473), and Aurelian (521).

47 LPR 22: "Sepultusque est in monasterio sancti Pullionis, quem suis temporibus aedificatum est, non longe a porta quae uocatur Noua; cuius sepulchrum nobis cognitum est." Deliyannis, *Agnellus of Ravenna*, 330–32, elaborates on the debates over why Agnellus uses the term *monasterium* not only for a monastery, but also for a side chapel or private chapel, areas that did not hold public masses.

48 See Lawrence, *Sarcophagi of Ravenna*, 21. As with the Roman sarcophagi, where the patron would be as prominently displayed as the dedicatee, this new inscription promotes Archbishop Antonio Codronchi (b. 1748; archbishop, 1785–1826) as the new consecrator. On the issue of the reuse of Christian sarcophagi as church altars, Elsner has noted that beginning in the seventeenth century in southeastern France, "sarcophagi were put inside churches as witnesses to the continuity of Catholic Christianity and its living heritage in direct descent from the early Church." This seems to be at play in Ravenna as well, although with the emphasis on the continuity of the bishops and archbishops: J. Elsner, "The Christian Museum in the South of France: Antiquity, Display and Liturgy from the Counter-Reformation to the Aftermath of Vatican II," *Oxford Art Journal* 32 (2009): 188.

49 LPR 33: "sepultusque est in iam dicta basilica sanctae Agnetis martiris ante altare sub porfiretico lapide; alii aiunt, post altare subtus porfiretico lapide."

50 HIC REQUIESCAT IN PACE CORPVS S(an)C(t)i EXUPERANTII PONTIFICIS ET CONFESSORIS ATQ(ue) ARCHIEPISCOPI S(an)C(t)i RAVENNATIS AECCLIESIE.



FIG. 2 Sarcophagus of Exuperantius, Cathedral, Ravenna

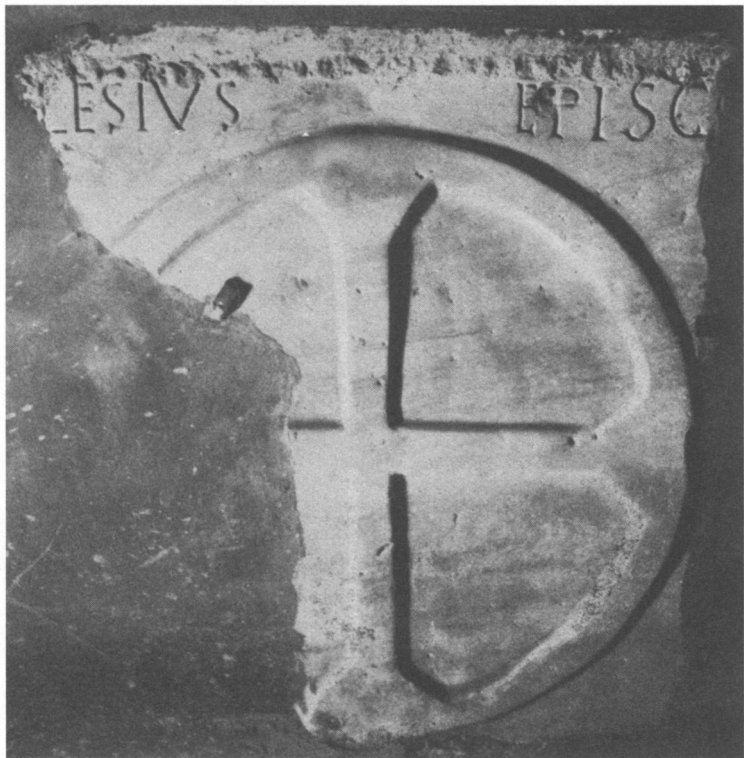


FIG. 3  
Sarcophagus Fragments of Ecclesius,  
Museo Arcivescovile, Ravenna  
(photograph from Rugo, *Iscrizioni*)

within a circle with a fragment of the inscription [ECC]-LESIIUS EPISC[OPUS]. This panel, still in the Basilica of San Vitale, has probably been there since it was initially set up in the sixth century, based on the details provided by Agnellus.

In Agnellus, the account of Ecclesius's episcopal reign is comparatively long within the corpus of the earlier bishops due to his role as patron and builder and perhaps because it includes a supposed letter from Pope Felix outlining the special status and conditions of the church of Ravenna. Agnellus also describes a metrical inscription, laid in mosaic in the recently constructed Basilica of San Vitale, which provides in its final two couplets a great deal of insight into the possibility of burial within a church in Ravenna:

Also this man ordered that it will be preserved by  
a perpetual law  
that in these places no one is permitted to be  
buried;  
But because the tombs of the previous bishops  
remain,  
it may be lawful in this place or a similar one.<sup>51</sup>

One suspects that Ecclesius, who himself was to be buried *in ecclesia sancti Vitalis*, was trying to prevent the local notables from being interred within the sacred confines of this church or any other similarly holy area. Both of Ecclesius's successors, Ursicinus and Victor, adopted their predecessor's practice of burial within in San Vitale, reportedly near the altar of St. Nazarius. This attempt, however, "to prevent the wealthy and powerful from seeking entombment *ad sanctos*, near the altars and relics," is one of many during late antiquity, notably by church councils.<sup>52</sup>

51 LPR 61: "Hoc quoque perpetua mandavit lege tenendum  
His nulli liceat condere membra locis.  
Sed quod pontificum constant monumenta priorum,  
Fas ibi sit tantum ponere seu simile."

52 M. McLaughlin, *Consorting with Saints: Prayer for the Dead in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, 1994), 31. The fact that a mosaic epitaph in a church demands non-episcopal burials be banned indicates that it must have been a prominent issue, as other local basilicas became desirable areas based on their collections of relics and the burgeoning cult of bishops. Furthermore, we know of at least one individual who desired to be buried at San Vitale after Ecclesius. At the end of the sixth century, a soldier named Droctulf was, at his request, given "an honorable burial in front of the entrance of

What Agnellus describes, and what appears to be the case with this sarcophagus, is an effort by Ecclesius, who was responsible for the establishment of the Basilica of San Vitale, to position himself, and by association the bishops of Ravenna, as the only ones with authority within the church during their lifetime and who inhabit it in perpetuity. The figure of Julianius Argentarius, who Agnellus reports to be the prime sponsor of the church, as well as of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, is not mentioned with regard to the completion of this space. Theoderic is also never mentioned, although he contributed money for Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, the church known as Sant'Andrea dei Goti, and perhaps the Arian cathedral and baptistery.<sup>53</sup> No matter who constructed the churches, at this point in history, it was the bishops and saints who inhabited them temporally and permanently.

Another example of a sarcophagus with a similar dating issue, also stemming from episcopal reuse, is that attributed to Archbishop Agnellus (557–570).<sup>54</sup> Now in the Church of Sant'Agata, where the writer Agnellus described its placement, the sarcophagus was made into a reliquary for the martyr Sergius and an altar in the seventeenth century, although it dates originally to the first half of the third century.<sup>55</sup> There is debate about the dating of the inscription based especially on the crosses, which suggest the seventh century, and when exactly Bishop Agnellus was interred or reinterred.<sup>56</sup> To add to the complexity, an epitaph on marble, now in the Museo Arcivescovile in Ravenna, also seems to indicate the resting place of this episcopal leader. Although one cannot be certain that the sarcophagus and the plaque were concurrent, the account of the burial in the *Liber pontificalis Ecclesiae*

the church of the martyr Vitalis" (*honorabile sepulchrum ante limina beati Vitalis martyris*): Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards* 3.19, MGH ScriptRerLangob. Droctulf's desire to be buried *ad sanctos* was not out of the ordinary in general, but he was one of the rare cases of non-ecclesiastic burial centered on a church in Ravenna known through literary sources.

53 For the royal patronage of Theoderic, see B. Ward-Perkins, *From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Urban Public Building in Northern and Central Italy, AD 300–850* (Oxford, 1984), 241.

54 Under Justinian, the church in Ravenna was upgraded to an archiepiscopal see.

55 A33 in Kollwitz and Herdejürgen, *Ravennatischen Sarkophage*.

56 Deichmann, *Ravenna* (n. 2 above), 2.2:297, suggests the seventh century.





FIG. 4 Sarcophagus of Theodore, Sant'Apollinare in Classe

*Ravennatis* supports the suggestion that this marble panel is perhaps the original (or at least was in place in the ninth century), as the text presented by Agnellus is identical to the extant sections of an inscription that he describes in situ: “the letters of his epitaph are inscribed in the marble above his body.”<sup>57</sup>

Finally, we approach the sarcophagus of Theodore (677–691), who occupied the see in Ravenna more than a century after Archbishop Agnellus (485–570).<sup>58</sup> His monumental sarcophagus is well preserved and has a lid (original to the reuse of the seventh century) intact on which the epitaph appears (fig. 4). Although this monument is not mentioned in the *Liber pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis*, Agnellus does report that Theodore, whom he despised, was buried in

Sant'Apollinare in Classe, where every archbishop after John II (578–595) has his final resting place.<sup>59</sup>

The sarcophagus, which originally dates to the fifth century, is quite large and has a barreled lid. Both the sarcophagus and the lid are ornately carved with the same motifs, to such a degree that the leaf design along the rim of the sarcophagus matches that of the lid in size and shape. The preeminent themes are of crosses and birds (doves and peacocks), as well as an overarching vegetal pattern. One face features a chi-rho monogram with an alpha and omega suspended between the arms of the chi, flanked by peacocks and doves eating grapes from vines. This monogram is duplicated on both sides of the lid. Both sides also feature three monograms: the central monogram is identical to the one on the sarcophagus, while the other two are cross-rho monograms. Identical, simple inscriptions are carved immediately below the monograms on the lid on both sides: “Here rests in peace Theodore, a *vir*

57 LPR 92: “... litteris marmore exaratis epitaphium super corpus eius.” The inscription, found in CIL 11:305 and also, no. 38 in P. Rugo, *Le iscrizioni dei sec. VI–VII–VIII esistenti in Italia* (Cittadella, 1976), is damaged on its right side, although its text can be easily restored with a comparison to its record in Agnellus. This fact further supports the claim of legitimacy in reading Agnellus’s other descriptions of epitaphs and inscriptions.

58 B16 in Kollwitz and Herdejürgen, *Ravennatischen Sarkophage*.

59 This pattern of the consolidation of a single basilica for the graves of bishops was common in sixth-century Italy, but best recorded in Ravenna: Picard, *Souvenir des évêques* (n. 27 above), 180–92.

*bonus*, archbishop.”<sup>60</sup> Besides the striking orthography (the use of an inverted *S* as well as its correct form and a delta in place of *d*), this inscription does little to promote Theodore and his position.<sup>61</sup> The power rests in the sarcophagus itself, which was placed above the ground on its own squat legs and was designed to stand out. The religious authority of this sarcophagus (and by extension, of the bishop interred within it) is clearly projected through the inscriptions and monograms on both sides, the latter in great quantity.

All these sarcophagi, and those later constructed, share the simple epitaphs while relying on powerful Christian imagery to convey the importance of the individual. Even when a sarcophagus was reused, its original Christian motifs or designs retained their value and perhaps even added to the authority of the object. Agnellus suggests that rather than using the sarcophagus as a vehicle for texts and images, those interring the bishops placed detailed epitaphs on marble or in mosaic above or next to their tomb, and left their burials or sarcophagi unadorned by words. Yet Agnellus also suggests that tombs, especially sarcophagi, placed above ground are even more potent than entombment underground, as illustrated in his urging to Petronax that the body of the bishop Maximian be unearthed and placed above ground in an exalted location (*corpus beati Maximiani de sub terra traheret et in sublimum poneret locum*), but in the original sarcophagus (*eadem arca*) in which he had been buried.<sup>62</sup> The combination of the iconic function of the sarcophagi, connected through text and imagery to the role of the bishop, and these monuments’ location within a church give these tombs their power to project a perpetual spiritual and political authority.

### The Sarcophagi of Early Medieval Secular Elites

The earliest of the Christian sarcophagi with an original and uncontested attribution belongs not to a bishop, but to Seda (d. 541), a eunuch and cubicularius in the court of Theoderic. All that survives is the front

panel, decorated with a tabula flanked by two arcades, that was originally part of a sarcophagus from the third century (fig. 5). Other than the inscription on the tabula, however, it remains featureless, as the two original figures that would have been in relief under the arcade have been removed and nothing was introduced to replace them. The inscription in the tabula provides all the information we have about Seda and his position and features an epitaph format different from other Ravenna sarcophagi: “Here rests in peace the *vir sublimis* Seda, a eunuch and cubicularius of King Theoderic, who lived around 40 years. He was placed here on the fourth day before the ides of March, during the consulship of Basilius, *vir clarissimus*, during the fourth indiction.”<sup>63</sup>

Although this funerary inscription does not mention the patron or the person who created the monument, the prominent mention of Theoderic gives some indication of his role in Seda’s life as well as perhaps this monument to his death. Like many Roman sarcophagi that provide details of the deceased’s livelihood, either in an epitaph or through sculptural details, Seda’s epitaph acknowledges his social rank, as a *vir sublimis*, as well as his position of cubicularius.<sup>64</sup> This administrative position was perhaps one of the most powerful in the Ostrogothic kingdom, as the cubicularius would have been the closest associate of the king, other than perhaps the queen, and a necessary part of an imperial court.<sup>65</sup> The fact that Seda was a eunuch is linked to his position, since in the remnants of the western Roman imperial house preceding the

63 HIC REQUIESCIT· IN PACE VIR S(u)BL(imis) | SEDA IGNVCVS ET CVBICVLARIVS RE|GIS· THEODERICI QVI VIXIT ANN(os) PL(us)M(inus) | XL· DEPOSITVS EST SVB D(ie) IIII ID(us) | MARTIAS, BASILIO IVN(iore)· V(iro) C(larissimo)· CONS(ule) | INDICIONE QVARTA. For the inscription, see Valenti Zucchini and Bucci, *I sarcophagi* (n. 2 above), 51; *CIL* 11:1, 310; and Rugo, *Iscrizioni*, 32 (no. 27). The tabula, of the style called *tabula ansata*, features flared handles (*ansata*) on either side.

64 The title of *vir sublimis* was one of many that became popular during the late fourth and fifth centuries and whose meaning, once narrowly defined, became quite dynamic. Although it has the literal meaning of “a distinguished man,” during the Gothic period in Ravenna it was simply a designation of elevated social standing.

65 In the Frankish world, this position also included acting as an emissary: P. S. Barnwell, *Emperor, Prefects and Kings: The Roman West, 395–565* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992), 101–2. Seda is also just one of two eunuchs known in the Gothic world. See J. Moorhead, *Theoderic in Italy* (Oxford, 1992), 75 n. 42.

60 † HIC RESQVIESCIT IN PACE THEOΔORV2 V(ir) B(eatus) ARCHIEPI2COPV2 †

61 There is also an error in spelling: the *h* and *i* in *archiepiscopus* are reversed.

62 *LPR* 83.



Fig. 5 Sarcophagus of Seda, Museo Arcivescovile, Ravenna

Ostrogothic takeover, as well as in Constantinople, the practice of maintaining eunuchs in high positions within the imperial palace was quite common, especially in the rank of cubicularius.<sup>66</sup>

It is significant that the sarcophagus panel is devoid of even Christian decoration. Dorothy Verkerk notes that the “recognizably earlier decorative framing was left intact,” and it is possible that no new imagery was created due to the complex nature of the Christological controversy during the lifetime of Seda.<sup>67</sup> From the inscription, the only Christianized element

is the introduction: *hic requiescat in pace*, may he rest here in peace.

The surviving slab of this sarcophagus is now on display in the Museo Arcivescovile in Ravenna, but its original location remains unknown; the same is true of when or how it ended up in the possession of the episcopacy. Patrick Amory suggests that “it was probably at the cathedral from the start, and Seda was thus a Catholic,” given that “it seems unlikely that anyone would have gone to the trouble to move” a “heavy sarcophagus.”<sup>68</sup> This explanation is highly unlikely, as sarcophagi are moved just as frequently as they are reused. Because Seda’s sarcophagus was originally carved in the third century, it most likely would have been taken from a Roman necropolis outside of the city. The most significant feature, however, is the lack of surviving Christian iconography, or any detail beyond the architectural arcades depicted on the panel. Every other surviving sarcophagus from the fifth through the eighth century has at its core some decorative element that denotes the Christian belief of the interred, be it crosses or Christological epigrams or the reuse of fifth-century sarcophagi with biblical scenes.

66 Hopkins notes that during the reign of Diocletian, eunuchs became essential parts of the imperial household, with their influence being a factor in the “preservation of central monarchic authority,” but in the late antique west they held very limited and isolated positions: K. Hopkins, “Eunuchs in Politics in the Later Roman Empire,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 189 (1963): 62–80. Without doubt, however, they proved to be important parts of the imperial court—and by extension, those imitating an imperial court, like Theoderic—well into the middle Byzantine period, when they maintained the imperial household and other intimate tasks, such as preparing the dead for burial: K. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago, 2003), and R. Guiland, “Les Eunuques dans l’empire byzantin: Étude de titulature et de prosopographie byzantines,” *EtByz* 1 (1943): 197–238. With respect to other eunuchs in Ravenna, besides Justinian’s general Narses, the most prominent was an exarch, Eleutherius, who took power in 616, and according to Agnellus, held larger aspirations (*LPR* 106).

67 Verkerk, “Life after Death” (n. 5 above), 85.

68 P. Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy: 489–554* (Cambridge, 1997), 412. It is problematic that in his description of this panel Amory states that it is “on a beautifully carved sarcophagus found in the Catholic cathedral of Ravenna.” This is correct only in its description of the *present* location.



One could hypothesize that the lack of religious imagery in funerary monuments is consistent with the first generation of Ostrogothic administration, as Seda's simple sarcophagus echoes the simple monumental tomb of Theoderic, which, although austere, features the so-called Zangenfries as a prominent decorative element.<sup>69</sup> Rather than assign a religious significance, Catholic or Arian, to the absence of clear Christian language in the epitaph, it may be more likely that the choice to abstain from using Christian imagery was in fashion for those in the Ostrogothic administration or perhaps that his sarcophagus was intended for a secular location.<sup>70</sup>

The dramatic differences between Seda's sarcophagus and those of other individuals in important civic governance positions in the fourth through the seventh centuries demonstrate its uniqueness. For example, the fourth-century sarcophagus of Flavius Gorgonius, a former *comes rerum privatarum* and *praefectus praetorio* (at this time, essentially the civil administrator for the Empire), featured the architectural relief of a "city gate" framing Christ flanked by the apostles on the front panel, while the example of the sarcophagus of the exarch Isaac (described below) had biblical reliefs. This practice makes Seda's sarcophagus even more of an exception and his alignment with the Ostrogothic regime even clearer.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast to Seda's barren epitaph and decoration on the surviving fragment is the reuse of an elaborate tomb and complex inscription for Isaac, the exarch who governed Italy from 625 to 643 (fig. 6). Although he is noted prominently in the *Liber pontificalis*, is mentioned in sources ranging from Fredegar to

the eleventh-century *Chronicum Patriarcharum Gradensium*, and is the patron of two other inscriptions, nothing is known about Isaac's burial beyond what is recorded on the epitaph of the lid of his sarcophagus.<sup>72</sup>

Now in San Vitale (and also there in the fifteenth century), this monument was moved around in the early modern period, and its original location is unknown.<sup>73</sup> Dating from the first half of the fifth century, this elaborate sarcophagus has on one of the long faces the Adoration of the Magi in high sculptural relief and on the other a chi-rho monogram flanked by facing peacocks. On the shorter ends are a scene of Daniel, wearing a Phrygian cap, with two lions, and Christ raising Lazarus from the tomb.<sup>74</sup> Unlike Seda's panel, here the Christological imagery appears in great quantity. The barreled lid of this locally produced sarcophagus has a raised cross as well as the inscription. It is almost certainly of a later date than the sarcophagus, because of its ill fit and the use of a different type of marble, although this has been debated.<sup>75</sup>

Unlike the other epitaphs found on sarcophagi in Ravenna during this period, Isaac's is remarkable because it is entirely in Greek—and the first chronologically to have an inscription only on the lid—as well as designed to be completely visible, projecting its

69 For interpretations of the decoration on the mausoleum, see D. M. Deliyannis, "The Mausoleum of Theoderic and the Seven Wonders of the World," *JLA* 3 (2010): 369–70, 373–74.

70 Another factor that may tie Seda's sarcophagus to the Ostrogothic style is the use of dating not only by consular year, but also by indiction. Using both together is rare on sarcophagi from this period and may seem to be a sign of official status, a classicizing element used to create a sense of legitimacy and continuity. With respect to the original location of Seda's sarcophagus, Cassiodorus's *Variae* 3.19 notes that a sarcophagus manufacturer is to have sarcophagi made for the palace under Theoderic's patronage.

71 For the sarcophagus of Flavius Gorgonius, see M. Lawrence, "City-Gate Sarcophagi," *ArtB* 10 (1927): 8–10; G. M. Gabrielli, *I sarcofagi paleocristiani e altomedievali delle Marche* (Ravenna, 1961), 1–23; and Dresken-Weiland et al., *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage* (n. 2 above), 2:54–56.

72 For an outline of the historical background to Isaac, see O. Bertolini, "Il patrizio Isacio esarca d'Italia (625–643)," in *Atti del 2° congresso internazionale di studi sull'alto medioevo* (Spoleto, 1953), 64–68.

73 Kollwitz and Herdejürgen, *Ravennatischen Sarkophage* (n. 2 above), 55 (no. B3); Dresken-Weiland et al., *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*, 2:118 (no. 378).

74 With respect to reuse, based on the difference in style and content between the panel with the monogram and the remaining ones that have figures, Dütschke has argued that the monogram was added later (but well before the seventh century), and therefore, with the addition of Isaac's lid, the sarcophagus was reused twice—once with the addition of the crosses and again with the new lid: Dütschke, *Ravennatische Studien* (n. 2 above), 228–32. With respect to the original figures, Lawrence notes that the similarities between the sarcophagus belonging to Isaac and the one reused in the fourteenth century for Archbishop Rinaldo Concoreggio of Ravenna suggests that there was a workshop in Ravenna producing sarcophagi with well-carved figures framed by architectural components during the fifth century: Lawrence, *Sarcophagi of Ravenna* (n. 2 above), 4–13. The figures of the Magi proved to be popular in Ravenna and are prominent in the aisle mosaic of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo (cf. fig. 10).

75 Lawrence, *Sarcophagi of Ravenna*, 9.

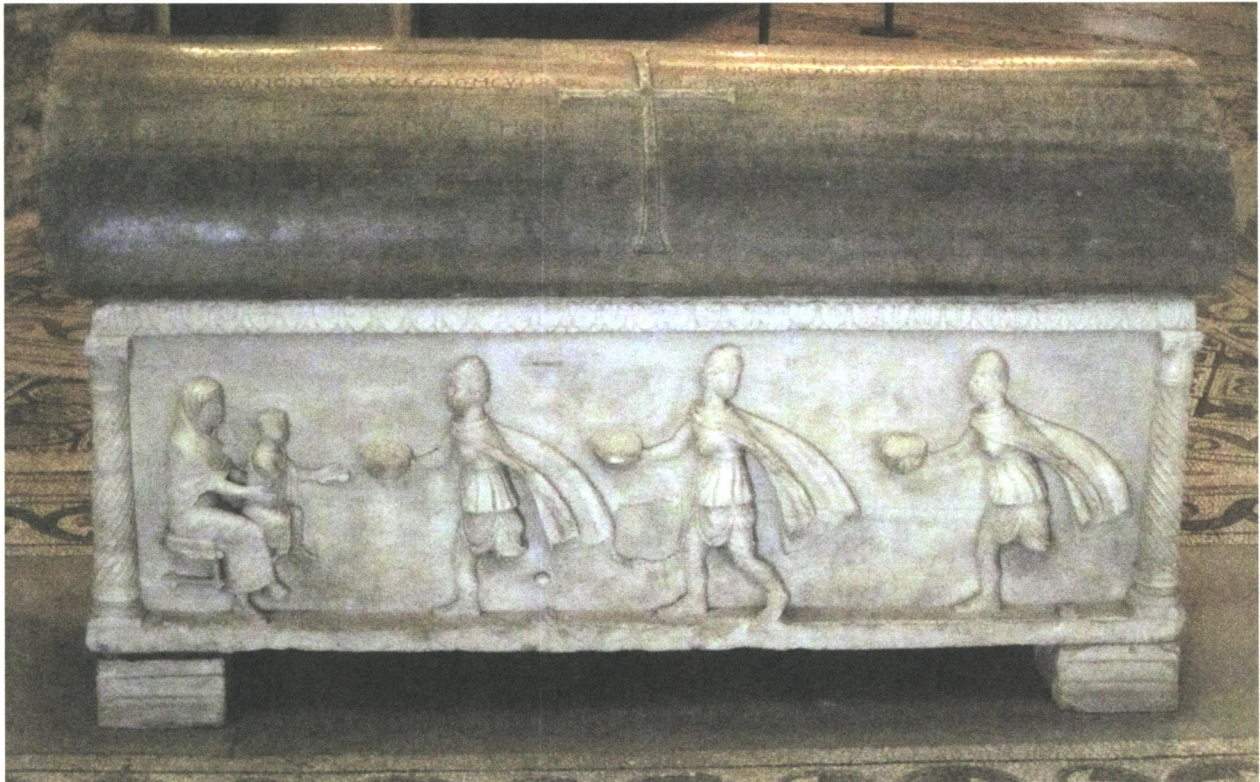


FIG. 6 Sarcophagus of Isaac, San Vitale, Ravenna

message from the top of the sarcophagus.<sup>76</sup> Given the location of the inscription and the quantity of detail on the original sarcophagus, the intent must have been for the sarcophagus to be freestanding and placed in a location where one could easily walk around it to view the inscription and the relief sculpture.

The inscription has been examined as the preeminent example of Greek epigraphic literature in Byzantine Italy as well as a key to understanding the chronology of the Byzantine-Lombard conflict during

this period.<sup>77</sup> Given the author's adeptness of the use of language, but the rarity of familiarity with Greek in the region at this time (as Thomas Brown notes), the text presents an important display of Greek culture and intellectual output in an environment where most may have been able to understand only the images displayed.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, its rarity is confirmed as it is one of the only two extant Greek inscriptions firmly dated to Ravenna's Byzantine period. (Another Greek inscription found in Italy was created for Isaac, discussed below.)<sup>79</sup>

76 There is currently a Latin translation on the reverse side of the Greek epitaph. This, however, is a much later addition, most likely not before the middle of the fourteenth century, a fact often misunderstood or not noted in many of the editions and descriptions of this inscription. For a discussion of the background to this debate, see S. Cosentino, "L'iscrizione ravennate dell'esarco Isacio e le guerre di Rotari," *Atti e Memorie della Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Antiche Province Modenesi*, 11th ser., 15 (1993): 24 n. 3. A more complete study of the monument was made by F. Fiori, *Epigrafi greche dell'Italia bizantina (VII–XI secolo)* (Bologna 2008), 65–89, which is especially helpful in highlighting the complexity of placing the Greek inscription on the curved and bisected lid.

77 In his article on the inscription as evidence for the Byzantine-Lombard war, Cosentino, "L'iscrizione ravennate," 24, notes that it "rappresenta uno degli esempi più insigni per stile e qualità letteraria della produzione epigrafica in lingua greca dell'Italia bizantina."

78 Brown argues that the lack of familiarity with Greek was a symptom of less regular communication between Constantinople and Ravenna, a situation that fueled the independence of Ravenna and the decreased effectiveness of imperial control: T. S. Brown, *Gentlemen and Officers* (Rome, 1984), 154.

79 If the location of the second inscription was not in fact Ravenna, then Isaac's sarcophagus represents the only Byzantine



+Here lies the distinguished commander For eighteen years for the serene emperors A great jewel of all Armenia At the moment of his glorious death his wife Continuously wails for the loss of her husband Where the sun rises and in the west	guarding Rome unharmed and the west Isaac, the ally of kings for he himself was Armenian from a noble family Susanna, chaste in the fashion of a holy dove of a man obtaining glory resulting from toils for he commanded the forces of the west and east.
+ Ἐνταῦθα κεῖται ὁ στρατηγῆσας καλῶς τρὶς ἔξ ἑνιαυτοῖς τοῖς γαληνοῖς δεσπόταις ὁ τῆς ἀπάσης Ἀρμενίας κόσμος μέγας· τούτου θανόντος εὐκλεῶς ἡ σύμβιος πυκνῶς στενάζει ἀνδρὸς ἐσπερημένη, ἐν ταῖς ἀνατολαῖς ἡλίου καὶ τῇ δύσει·	Ῥώμην τε φυλάξας ἀβλαβῇ καὶ τὴν δύσιν Ἰσαάκιος, τῶν βασιλέων ὁ σύμμαχος, Ἀρμένιος ἦν γὰρ οὗτος ἐκ λαμπροῦ γένους Σώσαννα σώφρων τρυγόνος σεμνῆς τρόπῳ ἀνδρὸς λαχόντος ἐκ καμάτων εὐδοξίαν στρατοῦ γὰρ ἤρξε τῆς δύσεως καὶ τῆς ἔω

FIG. 7 The inscription on the Sarcophagus of Isaac, San Vitale, Ravenna. I have chosen to translate it horizontally, but I note the break in order to make both readings possible.

An interesting, although contested, feature of this inscription, first noted in Bollini’s catalog, is that it is possible to read this epitaph both vertically, as two columns of text, and horizontally, as a single column, allowing for two somewhat different readings (fig. 7).<sup>80</sup> There are a number of important points to make about this inscription that help to demarcate its position relative to the others that have been examined. First, the geographical focus is not on a location, or a single city, but on Isaac’s role in the empire as a whole. Although he is mentioned as “guarding Rome,” within this context Rome is the empire, especially the west,

rather than the city. Although Italy is not mentioned, the contrast of “east” and “west,” “Armenian” to “Rome” clearly separates Isaac’s epitaph geographically from its location and presents him in the context of an elite imperial administrator and commander.<sup>81</sup> Second, the inscription is devoid of Christian or other religious overtone except for the allusion to Isaac’s wife, Susanna, “chaste in the fashion of a holy dove.” This is quite different from the other Christian inscriptions from Ravenna, except for Seda’s, which is equally lacking overt Christian language. Although the absence is startling, it is offset by the religious imagery on the sarcophagus.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, Isaac was not beyond using allusions to religion in the two other surviving inscriptions for which he was responsible. One, in Latin and quite damaged, names him as the patron of the Church of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello.<sup>83</sup> The other

inscription from this capital: A. Guillou, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques médiévales d’Italie* (Rome, 1996), 114–17.  
80 Bollini, *Iscrizioni greche di Ravenna* (n. 38 above), 47. Consentino, “L’iscrizione ravennate dell’esarco Isacio,” rejects the notion that the inscription can be read as two columns, and suggests that because this form proves quite difficult to read, only a horizontal reading was intended. It is possible, however, to read it as both a single column of text as well as two columns if a stop after γένους is supplied on the third line, and it is assumed that Σώσαννα is the subject of an implied verb (for example, “established this monument”), common in both Greek and Latin epitaphs. See fig. 3–5 in Bollini. The phenomenon of reading lines both vertically and horizontally appears as well in a funerary epitaph from Iasos, in which isopsephic elements of the text require reading the two columns of a fifth- or sixth-century funerary dedication for an archpriest named Hesychios in both directions. See J. Kalvesmaki, “Isopsephic Inscriptions from Iasos (*Inscriften von Iasos* 419) and Shnān (*IGLS* 1403),” *ZPapEpig* 161 (2007): 261–65.

81 There are some superficial resemblances between this epitaph and the one, now recorded only in manuscript, for the emperor Basil II, especially with respect to the parallels of location, east and west. See P. Stephenson, “The Tomb of Basil II,” in *Zwischen Polis, Provinz und Peripherie: Beiträge zur byzantinischen Geschichte und Kultur*, ed. L. Hoffmann (Wiesbaden, 2005), 227–38.  
82 There is, however, a small cross at the beginning of the inscription, which is bisected by a large raised cross, but both of these are visual rather than literary symbols.  
83 V. Lazzarini, “Un’iscrizione torcelliana del secolo VII,” in *Scritti di paleografia e diplomatica*, 2nd ed. (Ancona, 1969),

For while the body has been laid down in a grave  
the spirit remains up above with the divine  
Longing for the incorruptible light which it sees clearly  
fleeing from all the sordidness of sin,  
For this child himself was about eleven years, . . .  
a pure noble, exceedingly sweet.  
For him Isaac, who, as the exarch, was shown great  
with respect to deeds of the Italian forces,  
Lamented bitterly from the depths of his heart,  
as he was his paternal uncle,  
Having for him affections of paternal grief.

[τάφῳ τὸ γὰρ μὲν σῶμα κρύπτεται κατ[ω],  
[ἄνω δὲ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ἡ ψυχὴ μένει],  
[ποθοῦσα φ]ῶς ἀφθαρτον δ' τρανῶς βλ[έπει]  
[τὸ πᾶν ρύπ]ος φυγοῦσα τῆς ἀμαρτία[ς].  
[παῖς μὲν γὰρ] οὗτος ἦν ἑτῶν ὡς ἑνδε[κα],  
[ - - - ] ος ἀπλοῦς εὐγενής, γλυκὺς λ[ιαν].  
δὲν Ἰσαάκιος ὅστις ἔξαρχος μέγα[ς]  
ἔργοις ἐδείχθη τῶν Ἰταλῶν στρατευμά[των],  
ἔκλαυσε πικρῶς ἐκ βάθους τῆς καρδία[ς],  
ὡς πρὸς πατὸς μὲν θεῖος αὐτοῦ τυγχάνω[ν],  
ἔχων δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν σπλάγχνα πατρικοῦ πόθ[ου].

FIG. 8 Epitaph by Isaac in honor of his nephew and originally located in the Church of San Mauro in Comacchio. The restoration of the text follows *CIG* 4:9870, and was subsequently adopted by Bollini, *Inscrizioni greche di Ravenna* (n. 38 above), 44–45, where it is also noted that the eleven years matched the age of the unnamed dedicatee. This is also one of only two Greek inscriptions listed for Ravenna in Guillou, *Recueil*, 114–16.

inscription, an epitaph by Isaac in honor of his nephew and originally located in the Church of San Mauro in Comacchio, acknowledges his position with greater exactness than his own epitaph on his sarcophagus, while still maintaining strong Christian characteristics (fig. 8). Although there is no indication of why Isaac's own epitaph makes no allusions about his faith while the one honoring his nephew begins by invoking the youth's connection to the divine, one may hypothesize that Isaac is attempting to focus attention not on his piety, but on his performance as exarch and ally to the emperor, valuing military and administrative success over religious observance. Perhaps because Greek seems to have been his native (or near-native) language—he was originally a commander under Heraclius in North Africa—and he uses Greek in the epitaph for his nephew, the language choice provides an indication of the personal nature of the inscription. In the dedication at Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello, Isaac used Latin, as he was operating in his official capacity.

While the inscription is purely secular and unique within the context of sarcophagi, the sarcophagus itself falls into the general category of figured sarcophagi

from Ravenna and exhibits a number of close parallels with other sarcophagi as well as imagery presented in the mosaics from the churches, making it part of a valid and Christian mode of funerary memorialization. Even without knowing where it may have originally been established, the sarcophagus would nevertheless have advertised Isaac's piety, his status, and his position through various means and for different audiences, although with different ramifications for those literate and those not.

The connection between Seda and Isaac, who lived nearly two centuries apart and served different masters in different capacities, is that they both represent elite members of the ruling political bureaucracy and were memorialized in sarcophagi that differed from those typically used in the burial customs of their episcopal contemporaries. Both these men, however, choose to use sarcophagi as the medium for remembrance, and therefore are using the same language of presentation as the bishops of the city, although with very different objectives.

### Eighth-Century Sarcophagi

There are four bishops from the eighth century who have sarcophagi attested through the report of Agnellus and identified by the epitaphs on their tombs: Felix (709–725), Sergius (744–ca. 769), John VI (ca. 778–785),

127. Although there are some lacunae in the tablet, as it was quite damaged when it was found in 1895, the clearest section notes Isaac and his position: ISAACIO EXCELL(entissimo) EX(ar)C(ho) PATRICIO.



FIG. 9 Sarcophagus of Felix, Sant'Apollinare in Classe

and Gratosus (ca. 786–789).<sup>84</sup> According to Agnellus, who details the burials of these men (except for Sergius, as the account breaks off before its conclusion), the bishops were buried in Sant'Apollinare in Classe, which became the traditional burial location for the bishops of Ravenna with John II (578–595), more than a century earlier.

Of these men, Felix follows a much earlier scheme for his personal sarcophagus, as it is reminiscent of the one belonging to his predecessor, Theodorus, in style and in placement and formulation of the epitaph on the lid.<sup>85</sup> Felix's sarcophagus, which was perhaps originally

carved in the third century, but greatly reworked in the eighth, is finished on only one side and depicts on either side of the main panel arcades with hanging lamps and lambs below crosses flanking a cross-rho monogram (with an alpha and omega suspended below the arms) underneath an arcade with a pitched roof in the center. The lid, only partially finished on the back, is finished on the front side with two crosses (with an alpha and omega suspended below the arms) set inside two circles of geometric leaves on each of the sides (fig. 9). On the front side of the lid, above a band of interwoven ribbon, is the inscribed epitaph: "This tomb preserves enclosed the body of *domnus* Felix, most holy and thrice most blessed archbishop."<sup>86</sup> Agnellus provides a long description of an epitaph for Felix that was not part of the sarcophagus itself, but may also have been inscribed on a marble slab near its original location. A late medieval description of this church describes the

84 This designation of John VI is by no means certain, but the majority of scholars have attributed this tomb to him. For a further discussion on these four and their tombs in Sant'Apollinare in Classe, see Picard, *Souvenir des évêques* (n. 27 above), 190–92.

85 No. 58 in Valenti Zucchini and Bucci, *I sarcofagi a figure e a carattere simbolico* (n. 2 above), 56–57. The similarities between the inscriptions on the sarcophagi of Felix and Theodorus provide an interesting perspective on the role of bishops after their death, as the episcopacies of Felix and Theodorus could not have been more different in the eyes of Agnellus, who treats Theodorus harshly because of his willingness to abandon Ravenna's autocephaly while he greatly favors Felix due to his presumed sanctity.

86 "Hic tumulus clausum servat corpus domn(i) Felicis s(an)c(t)issi(mi) ac ter beatiss(imi) archiepiscopi": Rugo, *Iscrizioni*, 24, no. 10. The execution of the inscription is poor in comparison to the other episcopal epitaphs: Gray, "Paleography" (n. 20 above), 57. This is perhaps a further indication that a separate slab recorded a finer inscription.





Fig. 10 Sarcophagus of John VI, Sant'Apollinare in Classe

burial as in a marble tomb (*sepulchris marmoreis*), so perhaps even in Agnellus's time, both the sarcophagus as well as the inscription were visible in the church.<sup>87</sup>

Felix's sarcophagus, pagan in origin but reclaimed in the eighth century, follows the pattern of reuse of those of the bishops of the sixth and seventh centuries. Another example of this pattern is visible in the extant fragment from the sarcophagus of Archbishop Sergius, a damaged fifth-century lid now in the collection of the Museo Nazionale in Ravenna.<sup>88</sup> In the sixteenth century, the tomb of Sergius was reported to have been in Sant'Apollinare in Classe, but the sarcophagus

and lid must have been later separated.<sup>89</sup> Unlike the other eighth-century epitaphs, Sergius's inscription follows the format of the earlier episcopal examples: "Here rests in peace Sergius, a *vir bonus*, archbishop, he held this office for . . . years."<sup>90</sup> Despite the limited information presented by this fragment, it was most likely originally in Sant'Apollinare in Classe, and, like Felix, Sergius was interred in a sarcophagus created centuries before his death.

The sarcophagi of John VI and Gratosus represent the final progression in the use and reuse of sarcophagi, as both were created in the eighth century specifically for the burial of these bishops. Although it has been suggested that the forms are originally pagan, the fact that none of the original attributes is reused other

87 The *Liber de aedificatione et mirabilibus aedis divi apostolicis Apollinaris, in civitate olim Classensi*, the work of a Camaldolese abbot from Classe, Vitale Acquedotti, published in honor of the translation of remains within Sant'Apollinare in Classe in 1516, provides a unique description of the church and its equipment. The Latin text is available in the appendix of M. Mazzotti, *La basilica di Sant'Apollinare in Classe* (Vatican City, 1954).

88 See no. 20 in Valenti Zucchini and Bucci, *I sarcofagi a figure e a carattere simbolico*, 41–42.

89 "Adsunt et hic praetera corpora praesulum beatorum Sergii, Leonis, Joannis junioris" (Next to and in addition to this [were] the bodies of the prefects, the blessed Sergius, Leo, and John): Mazzotti, *La basilica di Sant'Apollinare in Classe*, 260.

90 "+Hic requiescit in pace Sergius vb archiepc sedit anno(s)": Rugo, *Iscrizioni*, 44, no. 47.

than the general shape of the sarcophagus points to a new type of purpose-made sarcophagus (figs. 1 and 10). While both are large, barrel-lidded sepulchers, their design represents a strong break with previous pagan and Christian sarcophagi, but the epitaphs maintain a connection in formula to those previously deceased.<sup>91</sup>

With respect to design, the sarcophagi of John VI and Gratosus are identical on their finished front panel, featuring three crosses in relief (with the ends of the arms and top curled into serifs) separated by two panels on which the epitaphs are inscribed. The back of Gratosus's sarcophagus has the basic carved outlines for another three crosses, and these outlines also appear on the sides. In contrast, John VI's has more refined crosses in relief, identical to those on the face, on the sides. These sarcophagi are separated from those used by earlier bishops by the simple use of crosses, which no longer feature the elements of the chi-rho—a Hellenism that, while universally acknowledged, may have had less of an impact in locations where the percentage of those understanding Greek would have been quite small—and the pronounced lack of other design elements, such as figures, animals, and even vines. This marks a clear discontinuity compared with the “early Christian” sarcophagi, which continued in reused form through the eighth century, as attested by the sarcophagus of Felix, and well into the early modern period.

The epitaphs recorded on these sarcophagi easily bridge the gap between adopted sarcophagi and those purposely built. Although carved in different fashions, both follow Felix's formula: “This tomb preserves enclosed the body of our lord John, most holy and thrice most blessed archbishop.”<sup>92</sup> Unlike Felix, whom Agnellus recorded as having a long epitaph unconnected to his exact burial site, both John VI and Gratosus may not have had substantial epitaphs. Agnellus does not transcribe the epitaph for John but notes that “you will find his epitaph written over his tomb.” The same pattern applies for Gratosus, but Agnellus provides little detail about his burial other than that it is in the church of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, perhaps as

a sign that he perceived the simple inscription on the sarcophagus as too insignificant to record.

The eighth century proves to be an enigma with respect to episcopal sarcophagi, as some examples were created earlier and, in the case of Felix, significantly readapted for reuse, while others were locally produced for the bishops (John and Gratosus). In the accounts of Agnellus and Vitale Acquedotti, the early sixteenth-century writer who describes Sant'Apollinare in Classe with respect to the bishops of Ravenna, there is no differentiation between original use and reuse in regard to burial fittings.

However, the use of formulaic epitaphs (devoid of description and differentiation other than name) and the dominant use of crosses and the chi-rho monogram tie these different styles together and create a monolithic feel with respect to episcopal tombs. Despite the differences, they all ultimately presented the same textual material, with none of the metrical word play and verbal pyrotechnics seen in the epitaph of the exarch Isaac. Sant'Apollinare, though neither the primary church of Ravenna nor its cathedral, came to represent and display the uniformity and cohesiveness of the bishops of Ravenna as a political and spiritual group within a funerary basilica, a group that had since the episcopate of Maximian wielded tremendous power and during the eighth century came to hold complete power over the city.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusion

In Ravenna, not every sarcophagus or epitaph was visible, but each nevertheless communicated status and rank. It is clear that at the most basic level, funerary monuments helped console the bereaved while simultaneously rewriting the life of the interred. This was done through object and text, although in the case of Ravenna the disjunction between them is at times quite noticeable. In dealing with this issue,

91 See no. 60 (John) and no. 61 (Gratosus) in Valenti Zucchini and Bucci, *I sarcofagi a figure e a carattere simbolico*, 58–59.

92 “+Hic tumulus clausum servat corpus d(omni) n(ostri) Iohannis s(an)c(t)issimi ac ter beatiss(imi) archi(e)p(iscopi).” The formula is exactly the same in the inscription for both John and Gratosus.

93 Its early medieval mosaic decoration, the image of Apollinaris, the first bishop of the city, prominently featured in the apse above depictions of the bishops Ecclesius, Severus, Ursus, and Ursinius, stresses the church's role as the monument celebrating the continuity of episcopal tradition. The eighteenth-century paintings above the arches of the nave extend this focus, highlighting historical bishops through the fourteenth century and noting in particular which were buried in the basilica.



post-processual archaeological theory on death and burial provides a readjusting of perspective:

The deceased as he/she was in life may be thoroughly misrepresented in death—the living have more to do than just express their grief and go home. Thus the material culture retrieved by archaeologists as the remains of funerary rites is not the passive “statics” resulting from active behavioral “dynamics” but is itself part of the active manipulation of people’s perceptions, beliefs and allegiances.<sup>94</sup>

For the Romans interred in sarcophagi in Classe and Ravenna in the third century, the objective of burial within a sarcophagus was complex and included the promotion of their own wealth and position as well as a guide for remembrance. This form of burial was, however, of limited political value, a fact suggested by the large number of extant juvenile burials. Those living in third-century Ravenna who saw a Roman sarcophagus with the relief of a young military man and a mourning mother along with the short epitaph identifying the figures would have been swayed by the image and the inscription, which “announced the emotional bond between commemorator and commemorated, and consequently manifest for posterity that fundamental complicity that exists between the living and the dead.”<sup>95</sup>

This same “complicity” between the living and the dead continues with the Christian monuments, but additional facets of the relationship beyond commemoration come into play. These new monuments, beyond promoting wealth and remembrance, feature the necessary religious content and context to help facilitate a different kind of interaction, which is especially important for the sarcophagi and tombs of the bishops of Ravenna. These funerary monuments, set free from catacombs and extramural cemeteries, communicated not only commemoration, but also sanctity worthy of devotion, and perhaps provide the same substantial benefits as relics. Before the end of the sixth century, episcopal tombs, scattered throughout

the city in chapels and monasteria beside churches, took on the role of ancillary devotional centers while expanding the area in which bishops (although deceased) were located.<sup>96</sup>

In the sixth century, episcopal tombs were centralized, first in San Vitale and later in Sant’Apollinare in Classe. They were also moved from chapels to a position beside the altar, so that the bishops could still take part in the liturgy. Any observer conscious of the location of these former members of the church would notice that even though they were not living, they still had access to the holiest areas of the church, and in effect were still part of the network of bishops. For these episcopal leaders, burial *ad sanctos*, prominently featured throughout the Mediterranean, does seem to be a factor in choosing sites for burial in Ravenna.<sup>97</sup> Agnellus suggests that for the bishops, the optimal position was next to the altar, so that mass and communion could be performed by the priests in contact with the deceased bishops; even if the sarcophagi were on display only during the funeral, their use would have been understood as a tradition associated with the bishops of Ravenna.<sup>98</sup> Ultimately,

96 The use of side chapels, a feature unique in Italy to the churches of Ravenna, as mortuary centers for bishops was not the only purpose they served. See J. C. Smith, “Form and Function of the Side Chambers of Fifth- and Sixth-Century Churches in Ravenna,” *JSAH* 49 (1990): 193–204.

97 The notion of *depositio ad sanctos*, burial near a saint, was fueled by the belief that “the greater proximity of the dead to these relics, the more potent the saint’s intercessions on their behalf.” In many areas this was the prime factor in the redefinition of civic burials in late antique cities, as for example, in Corinth: E. A. Ivison, “Burial and Urbanism at Late Antique and Early Byzantine Corinth (c. AD 400–700),” in *Towns in Transition: Urban Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Age*, ed. N. Christie and S. T. Loseby (Aldershot, 1996), 102. The veneration of the cult of saints was also responsible for the creation of funerary basilicas that “functioned as commemorative monuments for local communities of Christians” as locations of meeting for both the living and the dead: A. M. Yasin, “Funerary Monuments and Collective Identity: From Roman Family to Christian Community,” *ArtB* 87 (2005): 451. In funerary basilicas in North Africa, however, both lay and clergy were buried together. Here the placement of clerical burials in areas such as the apse and the transept and the use of epitaphs for bishops and priests was not necessarily tied to *ad sanctos* but rather the establishment of ecclesiastical hierarchies: A. M. Yasin, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult and Community* (Cambridge, 2009), 94–97, 100.

98 In Merovingian Gaul, decorated plaster tombs—imitating stone sarcophagi in areas where it was difficult to quarry and gypsum

94 M. P. Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (College Station, TX, 2000), 32.

95 Koortbojian, “*In commemorationem mortuorum*,” 227. The sarcophagus described is that of P. Aelius Ponticus, now on display in the Museo Nazionale.

*ad sanctos* was irrelevant because the bishops themselves were the ones providing the necessary sanctity, which was further suggested by the change in location of their tombs, first in side chapels and later close to the altar.

The use of sarcophagi in the early medieval period, beginning with the seventh century, of those unattached to episcopal power in Ravenna presents a different type of communication with the audience. In one sense, because burials in sarcophagi had become relatively rare, it may have been seen as imitative of episcopal burial or perhaps in line with royal and imperial burials. The epitaphs, however, display alternative connections to other elite networks. The text on the unadorned panel from Seda's sarcophagus clearly confirms his status with respect to Theoderic and within the systems of Roman timekeeping, while the metrical verse on Isaac's lid announces his role as "ally to the emperor." Especially with Isaac's sarcophagus, which through its projection of Christian symbols and its use of biblical stories parallels the types of tombs chosen by bishops, the role of the epitaph announces the true position of the individual interred, and its secular nature and promotion of his military position clearly denote the great distance he stood from the episcopal hierarchy. By using this elite format, which was maintained continuously in the bishop's sarcophagus, derived from a more egalitarian Roman

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was available—were a favored method of burial. Although they only "were seen by the living just before and at the time of the funeral," their decorative schemes were still crucial to their function: Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul* (n. 17 above), 108.

commemorative funerary monument, Seda and Isaac set themselves within the same hierarchical band as bishops, yet differentiate themselves with epitaphs that promote their positions in the secular administration of the city.

In the broadest sense, sarcophagi, vehicles for text and image, evolved from an open format to a monument limited in use to those of local elite status and ultimately became an important part of how later elites projected their authority and position. In the case of the bishops and archbishops of Ravenna, who had the additional advantage of a set location for these displays, the seemingly universal use of sarcophagi supplied a means by which they formed a unified front, at least from the perspective of those who interacted with the bishop. For the elites, sarcophagi allowed for the epitaph to project the individual's social or political role, while the vessel itself served as a sign of this status.

Ultimately, these examples represent what is extant from Ravenna, and also who chose to utilize sarcophagi. Although other evidence might call for reevaluation, the combined material and literary evidence indicates that not only were these burials in sarcophagi important as traditional social commemorations, but they also played a significant role in the display of the authority of entire groups of local elites.

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